



SKELETON IN KNIGHT ANOTHER WORLD IX

WRITTEN BY Ennki Hakari
ILLUSTRATED BY KeG

VISIT...

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*“It looks like
some kind of
magical item,
but I haven’t
the faintest clue
what it could be
used for.”*

SKELETON
KNIGHT IN
ANOTHER WORLD

IX

written by Ennki Hakari

illustrated by KeG



Ariane

Chiyome

Ponta

Arc



Elin

“Well, that certainly sounds intriguing. I never would have imagined that the empire had access to such a thing. So, once they put this formula to work the east will be driven back in short order?”

She ran the tip of her finger across Salwis’s lip.

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Seven Seas Entertainment

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Illustrations by KeG

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IX

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Skeleton Knight in Another World

Characters

Main



Ariane

A dark elf warrior from the forest capital of Maple. She excels on the battlefield through her swordsmanship, as well as the fire and earth magic granted to her through her spirit covenant.



Arc

A man who was transported into another world in the form of his skeleton knight avatar. He has access to the skills from the ten classes he mastered in game.



Ponta

A spirit creature known as a ventu vulpis (cottontail fox). Ponta has been along for the ride ever since being saved by Arc.



Chiyome

A cat girl who specializes in water magic. One of the six great warriors of the Jinshin clan—secret spies that once served the Revlon Empire.

Human Kingdoms



❖ Domitianus ❖

Wildly ambitious emperor of the Holy East Revlon Empire with a distinguished military background.



❖ Riel ❖

Young Nohzan Kingdom Princess who does whatever it takes to fulfill her role as a member of the royal family.



❖ Yuriarna ❖

Princess of the Rhoden Kingdom who strives to mend the relationship between elves and humans.



❖ Sekt ❖

Prince of the Rhoden Kingdom who is secretly being backed by the Great West Revlon Empire.

Great Canada Forest



❖ Fangas ❖

Ariane's grandfather and high elder of the Great Canada Forest.



❖ Eevin ❖

Ariane's doting older sister. She wields power over water and wind magic through her spirit covenant.



❖ Glenys ❖

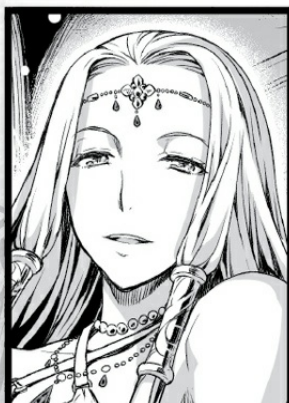
Ariane's mother may seem like a simple, carefree homemaker, but she's a top-tier fighter.



❖ Dillan ❖

Ariane's father, who takes a laid-back approach to his role as the elder of Lalatoya Village.

Others



❖ Elin ❖

One of Hilk church's seven cardinals, where she goes by her given name, Castitas.



❖ Villiers Fim ❖

One of the Dragon Lords. Lazies about the Lord Crown near Arc's home base.



❖ Felfi Visrotte ❖

One of the Dragon Lords. She has watched over the elves for one thousand years.



❖ Goemon ❖

One of six great Jinshin clan warriors, this silent and stoic fighter uses earth techniques.



Prologue

THE SIANA MOUNTAIN RANGE shot high into the air off to the northeast of Tisheng, one of the many cities belonging to the Great West Revlon Empire. The city looked as if it were a natural expansion of the forests that rose up around the base of the mountains.

Such monster-filled forests had long served as a natural border with Tisheng's neighbor, the Holy East Revlon Empire. Though the city had enjoyed many years of uninterrupted peace, the residents now found themselves victims of the eastern empire and the army of monsters serving under them.

Though Tisheng had managed to avoid war for much of its history, that didn't mean it was lacking in defensive measures. It had, after all, been fending off monster attacks for generations. Alas, it had never anticipated a concentrated attack from military-controlled monsters, and its defenses had fallen in a matter of moments.

At the center of Tisheng sat the estate of the local lord who oversaw Tisheng's affairs. The estate was a rather elaborate—even gaudy—affair, which spoke of power and wealth resulting from the city's proximity to the border.

The lord had since been ousted, and the estate now belonged to the Holy East Revlon Empire, serving as their first toehold into the Great West Revlon Empire—the front line of a new war.

Marked by his sharp nose, reddish-brown hair, and crisp military uniform, Domitianus Revlon Valtiafelbe, the young emperor of the Holy East Revlon Empire, gazed out the window of the former lord's estate as he brought a cup of warm tea to his smiling lips.

His attendant spoke up from the corner of the room.

"Something amusing, Your Highness?"

Domitianus glanced over at the man and let out a jovial snort.

Under normal circumstances, the lord chancellor was a constant presence at the emperor's side, making audacious observations and offering a derisive smile

at the slightest remark. However, right now, he was back in the capital attending to political matters.

Without him here, Domitianus felt as if a massive weight had been lifted from his shoulders. He cheerfully gulped down the rest of his tea and then strode to the other side of the room, where he stopped in front of a large map hanging on the wall.

Domitianus ran his gaze down from the center of the map, where Tisheng sat prominently, to the South Central Sea.

Ever since the Revlon Empire had split in two, the eastern side had been fixated on gaining access to a port. They were finally almost there.

“With Tisheng out of the way, the route to the Bay of Bulgoh is practically secured. The narrow section of land flanked by the Rhoden and Delfrent kingdoms no doubt has its own defenses in place, but without them being able to summon any reinforcements from the government, I predict that they too will fall under our onslaught.”

His attendant offered a firm nod. “Even if those scoundrels to the west desired to take back their lost territory, they are in no position to mobilize their entire army—not with hostile forces pressing in on the capital of Asbania. Even if the local lords in the south were able to get out a plea for help, the nobility to the east and west would likely ignore such a request.”

Domitianus drew his finger across the map. “Unfortunately, we weren’t able to weaken their defenses as much as I would have liked. There’s simply no way that we can defeat them with the limited strength of our monster-reinforced troops. I suppose we can just leave the hydra behind while our soldiers retreat and let it tear into whoever’s left.”

Domitianus snickered to himself as he shifted his gaze to the land south of the Great West Revlon Empire. His eyes landed on a country surrounded on three sides, a land that exerted great influence over the entire northern continent—the Holy Hilk Kingdom.

This kingdom served as the home of the pontiff, the head of the Hilk religion, which had spread like wildfire even before the unified Revlon Empire had split. Even Domitianus had to proceed with caution when it came to the Hilk.

However, Tohd Straus, the head of the empire's Runeology Cloister, had brought some intriguing news when he'd met with Domitianus recently.

"Assuming the rumors about the Holy Hilk Kingdom are true," the emperor mused, "well, that would be absolutely fantastic."

Domitianus's servant nodded. "If we can believe Straus, then it's the church that may request we direct our forces toward Nohzan."

Domitianus furrowed his brow in annoyance. This seemed all too likely.

Tohd Straus's assertions had been quite astonishing, so Domitianus had dispatched several of his spies to the Holy Hilk Kingdom to ascertain the truth.

According to the rumors, the Holy Hilk Kingdom had attacked all three of its neighbors. One of them, the Nohzan Kingdom, had struck back and killed the pontiff in a counterattack.

If this were true, the church would lose nearly all of its influence.

The Hilk leaders across the land would likely lay heavy criticism at the feet of the Nohzan Kingdom for its role in taking down the pontiff, but if the Holy Hilk Kingdom had indeed attacked first, then it would need to answer for such acts.

Try as he might, though, Domitianus could think of nothing in the church's recent conduct that might have led to these strikes.

It was unclear what the pontiff had been thinking, but as long as no reasonable justification was offered to the public, the Nohzan Kingdom would avoid criticism. Alas, the Hilk church was unlikely to roll over so easily.

Even if the pontiff was well and truly dead, it didn't mean that the church had lost all of its influence. There would likely be calls from across the northern continent seeking retribution. It would be difficult for the local lords to ignore such calls, and the Nohzan Kingdom was hardly in a position to withstand a concentrated attack.

Domitianus's lips contorted into a grin as an idea came to him. "I really would prefer to avoid the church's ambitions getting in the way of our march west. Besides, I think the Hilk have a much better enemy to spend their time fighting with."

He gave his attendant a knowing glance, but the other man only cocked his head in confusion. Domitianus could practically see the lord chancellor's face and hear his laugh. Annoying though he might be, the lord chancellor was never more than a step behind. There was simply no way a mere attendant would be able to perform at the same level as the man who handled all levels of the political sphere.

Domitianus spelled it out. "Though the innermost mechanisms of the church are rife with corruption, there must be some true believers among them. Perhaps we could offer our support in the name of creating a new Hilk. A unified Hilk."

The attendant swallowed hard. "You...you intend to divide the Hilk church, Your Highness?"

An ominous smile broke out across Domitianus's face as his companion finally understood. "I'm sure the people will support the true believers. It also provides us with an opportunity to rid ourselves of those corrupt officials who've been using the church's power for their own benefit. If the pontiff really is dead, then the Holy Hilk Kingdom must be in a state of hysteria. I doubt they have the attention for anything outside their own borders."

The attendant looked up at the emperor with admiration in his eyes. "In that case, the people wouldn't need to give up their faith. They could continue believing in a church that was more receptive to the words of His Highness. What a wonderful plan!"

Domitianus chuckled at this praise before crossing the room and dropping into the chair behind his desk.

Perhaps someday in the future, he could even dispatch an army to the Holy Hilk Kingdom in the name of taking back the holy lands. But that was a conversation for another time. Right now, he needed to reinforce his gains in the south and repel any counterattacks from the west.

With that decided, Domitianus began to pen a letter to Lord Chancellor Velmoas, regarding his plans. He left out his ultimate objective, but given the intellect of the other man, Domitianus had no doubt that Velmoas would understand his intentions.

The loss of the hydra was a painful one, but any losses were a drop in the bucket if it kept the church from directing its attention toward the empire.

“This should certainly strengthen our base. We’ll just have to keep the west off-balance. The winds of fate are on our side, after all.”

Domitianus smirked to himself as he imagined this not-so-distant future. Setting down the pen, he sealed the envelope with wax and handed it to his attendant.



Chapter 1:

Fehrbio Alsus, Capital of Ruins

IT WAS A DAY like any other when peace was brought to an abrupt end for two sisters living in Fehrbio Alsus, the glorious capital of the Holy Hilk Kingdom.

The Hilk had ruled this holy city for many generations, a fact that was evident even in the architecture. Many of the most extravagant buildings bore the marks of the church.

Many believers from across the kingdoms were drawn to the ancient capital, and its streets were constantly filled with pilgrims.

On this particularly fateful day, the lively bustle of the crowds managed to penetrate the heavy walls of the sisters' attic bedroom, located in a quaint suburb. The room was dusty and cramped, the ceiling sweeping down at a harsh angle, following the contours of the roof.

One of the sisters began to groan in her bed.

She was thin and of fair complexion, the rosy tinge to her cheeks hinting at a fever. Though she looked quite young, there was also something mature about her appearance. Her long, light-brown hair spread out across the bed around her. She seemed to be in some pain as she tossed and turned.

Her name was Atonei, and she lived in this small space with her younger sister.

Ever since the death of their parents several years ago, Atonei had worked herself to the bone waiting tables, trying to scrape together enough money to survive. But all that work had taken its toll on her and had left her ill in bed for the past few days.

"Are you okay, sis?"

The younger sister, no more than ten, looked over with great concern. She wore her own light-brown hair in a short ponytail that wagged back and forth behind her as she brought a damp towel to wipe her sister's brow. The fear of

losing her last remaining family member was clear on her face. It almost seemed a foregone conclusion that her sister would meet the same fate as their parents.

Looking down at her ill sister, she could swear that the god of death was staring back up at her.

Atonei smiled and reached up to touch her sister's face, in an attempt to comfort her.

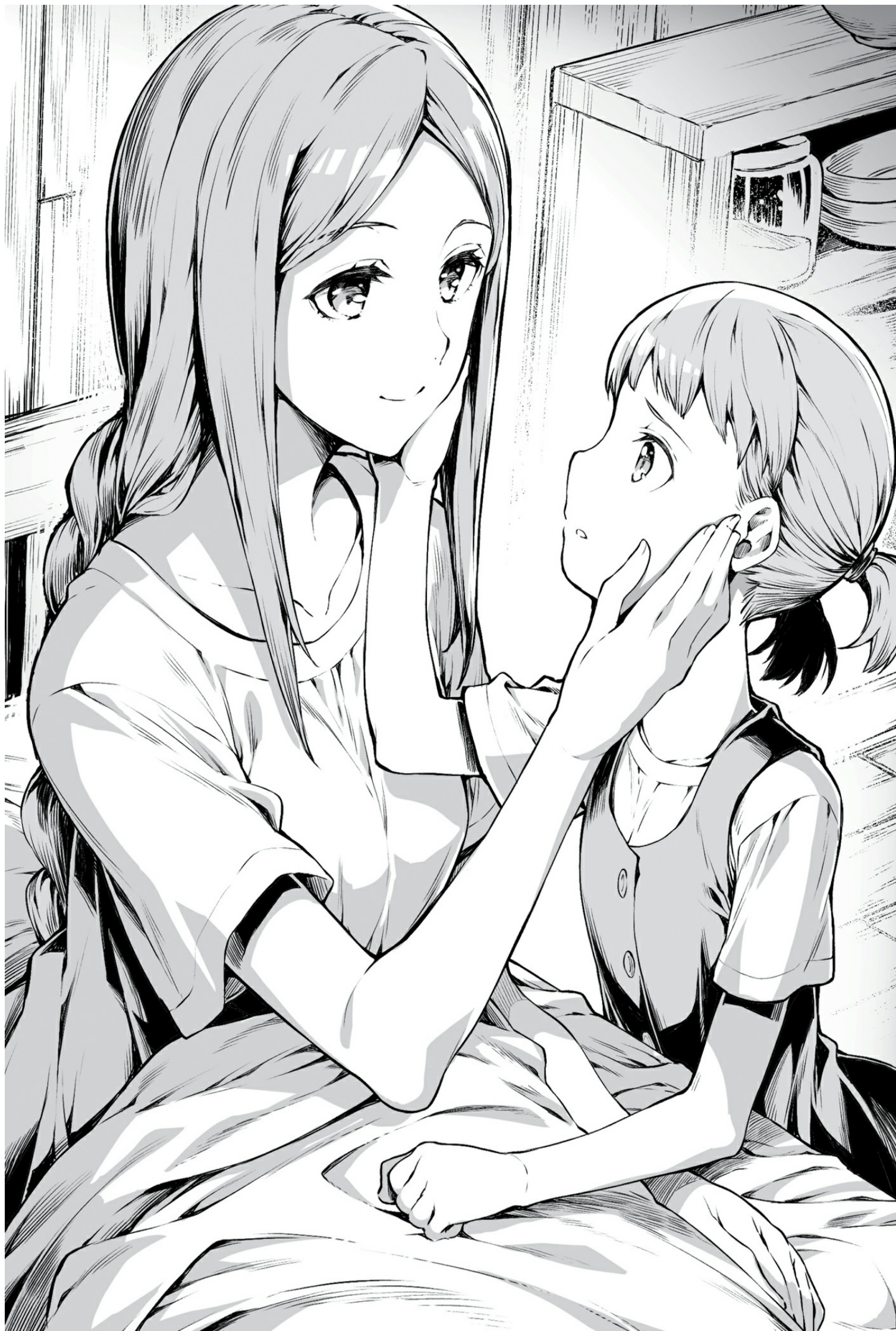
"Sorry for worrying you like this, Yahna. I'm going to be fine, really."

Though young, Yahna was hardly naïve enough to take her sister's words at face value. Her eyes were red and puffy from rubbing her fists against them in an attempt to stave off tears.

Atonei propped herself up and removed the damp towel before pressing her forehead against Yahna's. "See? My fever's finally broken, all thanks to your wonderful care."

Yahna placed her small hands on Atonei's cheeks, a look of relief spreading across her face. "You're really all right?"

Atonei chuckled at her sister's persistence. "I'm going to be fine, I promise. I'm just a little worn out."



“Well, maybe you can at least leave your night job? I’d hate to see you get sick like this again.”

Atonei frowned slightly. Though she might be young, Yahna still understood, at least on some level, what kind of work Atonei was doing at night. However, there were few opportunities in the city for women to earn money. Trying to survive as a waitress alone was difficult. She had little confidence that they could continue without the additional income from selling her body at night—and even those earnings were paltry at best.

Prostitution was technically forbidden in the capital. It only existed in underground brothels. For a city dedicated to God, it wouldn’t do to have prostitutes openly propositioning people in the streets.

Alas, even the most ardent believers were willing to exchange money to have their desires fulfilled.

Though prostitutes were subjected to punishment if discovered, that didn’t stop the industry from thriving. There were many brothels throughout the capital, and the majority of them did an excellent job of keeping their women safe and getting them paid. In that regard, it was far better than Atonei’s job as a waitress.

Anyone attempting to prostitute themselves on their own without joining a brothel was liable to be found out, tracked down by guards, and thrown in jail.

From the stories Atonei had heard from her clients, the guards’ treatment of imprisoned women was nothing short of deplorable. Were she an only child, she would have simply chosen to follow in her parents’ footsteps and move on to the next world.

She no longer feared death.

In fact, she’d lived much of her life feeling this way. The only thing that kept her going was the younger girl worrying over her—the last family she had left. The thought of leaving her little sister all alone in this world terrified her more than anything. That was what got through such grueling work.

Quitting her job simply wasn’t an option available. Besides, once someone joined a brothel, it wasn’t exactly easy to walk away.

Of course, Atonei wasn't about to share all of this with Yahna. Instead, she offered a smile and skirted around the issue. "Now that I'm feeling better, I'll see what I can do about getting them to lighten my load."

Yahna saw through her sister's insincerity and bit down hard on her lower lip, frustrated at her own powerlessness. However, she did her best not to let her disappointment show.

The room fell silent, but only for a moment. A loud commotion erupted outside, growing more and more intense. The two sisters shared a curious look.

"What could that be?"

"Huh?"

At first, it seemed like some kind of celebration. It was hardly uncommon to hear people holler and hoot at all times of day and night—friends reuniting, merchants haggling, or even drunks rambling. But it soon became clear that this was something different. It almost sounded like a wave crashing over the city.

A few moments later, terrified screams filled the sisters' room.

Atonei leaped from her bed, threw open the shutters, and leaned out.

"What's going on?" Yahna pulled herself up to the windowsill, standing on the tips of her toes. "What is it? I can't see!"

But Atonei found herself at a complete loss for words at the horror that lay before her.

A crowd of people were pushing and shoving as they desperately tried to escape through the alley running in front of the sisters' home.

A bizarre shape, unlike anything Atonei had ever seen, erupted out of the ground in successive bursts, as if pursuing the group. This...thing was unlike any of the monsters that lurked beyond the walls of the city, or the undead that were sometimes spotted in the sewers. It looked like some kind of black gunk.

The gunk moved about as if it had a mind of its own, springing up from gutters—or anywhere near the fleeing crowd—and pulling people into its inky darkness.

Its victims struggled at first, though in short order, they stopped moving at all

and simply became another part of the large, shapeless mass.

Judging from the fact that the screams seemed to be coming from every direction, it was clear that this was happening throughout the city.

The black sludge began to fill the alley, and a moment later, Atonei heard the shoddily constructed door downstairs shatter as the house filled with the ooze.

Atonei bounded away from the window and spun around. “Hurry up, Yahna! I need your help!”

“What is it?”

Though confused by her sister’s sudden change in behavior, Yahna followed Atonei toward the door. She was frantically trying to drag a large wardrobe in front of it. Yahna hurried over to her sister’s side.

Once the wardrobe was in place, Atonei moved to the bed. With Yahna’s help, she was able to move it into place behind the wardrobe.

At that moment, Yahna at last heard the screams from outside—and even downstairs—and realized what was going on. The relatively simple life she’d lived up until that morning was gone forever.

As the chaos continued beneath them, the two girls began to feel a sort of presence, creeping ever closer. Atonei pulled Yahna to her and dragged her into the corner, where they sat quietly, doing their best to suppress their breathing.

Yahna’s eyes darted nervously around the room as the sound of her sister’s pounding heart thundered in her ears.

THWUMP!

Something massive slammed into the door, shattering the makeshift barricade.

“Huh?!”

“Eep!”

Both girls temporarily lost their composure before Atonei slapped her hand over Yahna’s mouth, pulling the younger girl even closer to her body.

She could hear the creature on the other side of the door crawling around.

Then the noises trailed off as it drew away, leaving only the sound of blood rushing through their ears.

Yahna was the first to speak, her voice little more than a whisper. “Is...is it gone?”

Atonei listened closely. Once she was absolutely sure that she could no longer hear the creature, she slowly stood up and moved toward the door.

After picking her way through the broken furniture, she discovered that the door had a massive crack in it. The wall next to it had also been crushed from the force of the blow.

“I don’t think this door’s going to open any time soon.”

Atonei sighed and made her way back to the window to try to get a better sense of what was going on. Careful to keep her body out of view, she peeked outside.

The black ooze was nowhere to be seen, and the screams had grown more distant. Perhaps the trouble had already blown over in their part of town?

The capital had grown eerily quiet. The streets were completely empty of people.

Atonei swallowed hard and looked over to see Yahna pulling herself up on the other side of the window to see for herself. Something caught her attention and she shouted up to Atonei.

“Hey, look!”

“Shhhh!!!” Atonei reflexively quieted her sister before turning her attention in the direction Yahna was pointing. Her eyes went wide.

Somewhere near the cathedral at the center of the capital, as best as Atonei could figure, was a massive lump of the black ooze, slowly taking the form of a towering, humanoid figure.

The cathedral was colossal in its own right and could be seen from even the farthest reaches of the city, but this new creature completely dwarfed it.

“Oh, God...”

This was the only word, a prayer in a sense, that came to Atonei's mind in the face of such an impossible creature.

Just then, she noticed another black giant rising up farther off in the distance. That was when she understood that the world as she knew it had come to an end.

“Oaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaauuuuuurrrr!!!”

The two creatures cried out in unison, making the building shake.

Their booming voices sounded like the cries of tens of thousands of souls wailing in fear. The girls clutched each other tightly and shuddered.

For the first time, Atonei feared death. It was nothing like the times she'd run into bandits in back alleys or stood up for herself against the owners of the brothels.

And yet, even faced with the sight of death incarnate, Atonei refused to surrender. She clenched her fist and commanded her trembling body to still itself. She needed to get Yahna to safety. Nothing else mattered.

Atonei tore her gaze away from the giants. There was nothing she could do about them anyway. She scanned the streets for a route that would take them out of the capital.

It was then that she noticed the rhythmic tramp of an army marching off in the distance. Hope welled within her as she searched for the source of the sound. She caught sight of armored soldiers marching down the narrow city streets and was just about to call out to them, when she froze.

These were the templar knights, dedicated to defending the capital, but behind them she noticed massive half-spider/half-human monsters that seemed to be following them.

Just what was going on here?

With no way to escape, the sisters stayed in their attic bedroom, hoping they might yet find a way out of the city. It felt like an eternity had passed since the black gunk had first appeared, though it had only been a day or so.

The knights and their monster escorts increased their patrols as the massive black giants continued to stand watch at the center of the capital, occasionally letting out another massive roar that made the whole city shake.

Staying in hiding was beginning to take its toll on the sisters. Even though Atonei was managing, she had serious doubts that Yahna would be able to stay strong much longer.

From time to time, other survivors tried to escape, though they were quickly caught by the knights or the spider creatures. Their pained screams filled the streets.

There was still a bit of food and water in the room, but it wouldn't last forever. The question now was whether they'd die trying to flee the city or whether they'd starve to death.

Atonei decided it was time to leave their attic haven. "We can't stay here forever. Let's get out while we can."

"Okay." Yahna looked nervous, but she gave a firm nod. Even with all the danger outside their room, Yahna must have realized that they couldn't stay.

But this decision may have come too late.

Shortly after they began making preparations, they heard a loud explosion in the distance. A moment later, the dilapidated structure beneath them began to tremble.

"What now?!" Atonei rushed to the window, fear gripping her heart.

She ventured a peek outside, where she witnessed two immense shadows streaking across the sky. In their wake, a powerful gust of wind ripped the shingles from the nearby roofs.

As far as Atonei could tell, the creatures flying over the capital were dragons. Though she'd never seen one with her own eyes, she knew all about them from the stories. She gazed up in wonder from her attic window.

They flew right over the city and immediately launched a strike against the giants. With a powerful roar, the giants began to spit black spheres back at the dragons, who deftly dodged before unleashing powerful attacks of their own.

The black spheres crashed down into the city below, destroying large swaths of it. If one of those attacks hit their building, it would be reduced to splinters.

“Oh, God, please spare Yahna.”

Yahna clamped her hands tightly over her ears. “I’m scared...”

Atonei pulled her sister close and huddled in a corner of the room. She began to pray more fervently. After all, there was little else she could do.

As the battle between the dragons and giants grew more intense, the old building began to creak and sway, kicking up large clouds of dust.

After all the trauma the two young women had endured, this served as the breaking point for them. They both fainted, then and there.

When Atonei awoke to the sudden clatter of falling timber, silence had largely returned to the city. It was so quiet, in fact, that she wondered for a moment if she’d imagined everything that had happened earlier.

Looking up, she was surprised to see white clouds where the roof should have been. Only half of it remained.

“I...I guess it wasn’t a dream then.”

It didn’t stop with the roof, either. Part of the wall had also caved in, granting easy access to a neighboring house.

Their home had always been something of a wreck, but it was no longer suitable for them to keep living in it.

After checking to make sure Yahna was still alive, Atonei made her way to the window. What she saw left her at a loss.

The dragons and giants were nowhere to be seen. In their place was rampant destruction throughout the city.

The majority of the knights and monsters that had been patrolling the streets were gone, though there were still a few moving about. The situation was far from safe, but at the very least, they were in a far better position to make an escape than when the sludge giants had been alive.

Atonei rushed back to where her sister was lying on the floor, still unconscious. “Yahna, wake up! We’ve gotta get out of here!”

“Huh? What is...? Whoa!” Yahna blinked her eyes several times, looking around at their home.

“We can’t stay here any longer. We need to leave town.”

The younger girl nodded and quickly went about gathering her things. The two shared a spartan existence and had little valuables to take with them, but they’d still need to grab whatever they could to help them survive.

Atonei grabbed a well-worn leather backpack and shoved a paring knife and pot into it. Anything metal would prove particularly valuable, especially if they needed to sell things.

Realizing that they’d already eaten most of their food, Atonei glanced over at Yahna to make sure she was all right before climbing through the large hole in the wall and into the neighboring townhouse.

After making sure the building was empty, she hurriedly grabbed all of the fresh and preserved food she could find and rushed back to their room, where Yahna sat holding an old book and a doll.

The book was from their father’s collection and contained an illustrated compendium of medicinal and poisonous herbs. The doll was something Atonei had made out of scrap cloth shortly after their parents had died.

Neither of those were necessary to their escape, but Atonei could see how important they were to her sister. She ran a hand affectionately through Yahna’s hair before sliding the book into her bag and tying the doll to Yahna’s back. Yahna beamed.

“All right,” Atonei said, “the door’s a lost cause, so we’ll need to leave through the house next door.”

She took Yahna’s hand, but before she could step through the hole again, a man covered in rotting, infected wounds came crawling out toward them.

“Nnngaaaaaaaaaooooooooo...”

There was something about the way he groaned and the empty look in his

eyes that suggested there was nothing human left in him.

Looking closer, Atonei could see that his body wasn't actually rotting but rather was covered in that black gunk she'd seen earlier. It was eating away at him.

"Ack! Yahna, this way!"

Atonei tugged on her sister's hand and pulled her back into their room just as a black tendril shot out from the man's body, barely missing the young women.

With the door to their room still stuck fast, now their sole means of escape was blocked. However, Atonei was committed to protecting her sister at all costs. She picked up a fallen piece of timber and stepped toward the man, holding the wood at the ready in trembling hands.

Just then, Yahna called out. "Up! We can go up!"

She was pointing toward the large hole in the collapsed roof.

Under normal circumstances, it might have been quite a feat to climb up and out through the ceiling, but thanks to the location of their cramped attic room, they were relatively close to where the roof sloped down.

Atonei hefted Yahna up and pushed her through the hole. "Don't fall!"

"Okay!"

Atonei grabbed the edge and pressed her feet against the wall for purchase as she pulled herself up after.

"Hurry up, Atonei!"

She felt something grab at her leg, but she gave it a swift kick and knocked whatever it was back before dragging herself onto the roof.

Before she could even catch her breath, a black tendril came shooting up out of the room and over the lip of the roof, causing her to lose her balance and tumble backward in surprise.

She quickly recovered, however, and grabbed Yahna's hand. "We've gotta get out of here! Try to not lose your balance!"

"R-right!"

Fortunately for the two young women, the houses in this part of the city were all built close together, if not attached to each other, and they were able to run along the rooftops unimpeded, avoiding the streets below.

Atonei hazarded a look back and saw that the man had also made it up to the roof. He was crawling after them, far faster than should have been humanly possible. She pushed herself to run even faster.

But looking back while running along rooftops turned out to be a grave mistake.

“Hyaugh?!”

“Atonei!”

Her foot caught on a smashed shingle and she tripped, sliding down the steeply angled roof.

Yahna dropped to her knees to try to stop Atonei’s fall, but the weight of Atonei’s pack carried her down the slope.

Atonei waved her arms around frantically in a desperate bid to grab on to something. At the last second, she managed to grab the edge of the roof just as she tumbled over it, leaving her dangling helplessly two stories above the street.

“Atonei! Atoooooneeeeeei!”

Yahna’s face was a mask of panic as she started down the roof toward her sister. But Atonei merely shook her head.

“No, Yahna! Stay back! The roof might collapse! You need to get out of here, fast!”

“But...but...Atonei!”

Yahna hesitated, looking back in the direction they’d come. The gunk-covered man crawled ever closer, tendrils extending from his body.

“Yahna, please! You need to get out of here! I’ll be fine!”

Atonei pleaded with her sister to save herself, but the younger girl shook her head defiantly, tears welling her eyes. At this rate, they’d both be killed. She

tried to yank herself up onto the roof, but her backpack was too heavy.

Atonei turned her gaze downward. She was pretty sure she wouldn't die from a two-story fall, but she could easily break a bone or otherwise seriously injure herself. That would certainly hinder their escape.

It was clear that Yahna wouldn't leave her so long as she hung on to the roof—a death sentence for them both once the crawling man caught up to them.

Just as Atonei made up her mind to let go, she noticed a group of armored skeletons gathering below her.

“Oh, come on!”

The skeletons were wearing the armor of the templars, which meant that all of the knights she'd seen patrolling the city the last few days were probably undead as well.

If she let go, even if she wasn't seriously injured, the undead knights would likely kill her. But there was no other option. Not if she wanted to save Yahna.

Atonei let go.

“Atonei?! ”

Time moved slowly. Atonei heard her sister's pained cry echo over the edge of the roof.

Her arms felt heavy as she stretched them out toward the sky in surrender. The next thing she felt was a massive pressure against her back as all the air was knocked from her lungs.

FWOOMP!

“Nyaah?! ”

Atonei hacked and heaved, trying to take stock of her situation. She was still alive, at least.

In fact, she was lying atop one of the undead soldiers, its arms and legs clattering feebly in an attempt to grab her. Apparently, she'd gotten lucky and landed on one of the knights, which had broken her fall.

Unluckily, there were still several more undead knights now surrounding her.

Atonei forced herself to her feet, her face contorting from the pain shooting through her back.

Her sister called out from up above, her voice thick with worry. “Are you okay? Answer me, Atonei!”

Atonei looked up. The crawling figure was almost close enough to grab Yahna now. Atonei screamed as loud as she could to urge her sister on.

“Forget about me! I’m fine! Just get out of there, Yahna! Hurry!”

This seemed to rouse Yahna at last, and the girl took off running. However, between her short legs and the uneven terrain, she wasn’t able to move very quickly.

Atonei pushed her way through the undead soldiers and began running down the street in the same direction, but she quickly found her path blocked by an imposing figure—one of the spider monsters.

The top half of the creature consisted of a deformed humanoid torso with four arms, wielding a massive blade the size of a person, while the bottom half was a massive spider that blocked nearly the entire street. It was far larger and more terrifying than she’d realized from her window.

The freakish man-spider opened its mouth in an unsettling smile, exposing its fangs, as it raised its sword. The force of this motion kicked up a gust of wind, sending Atonei’s hair fluttering. In that moment, she felt as if this was the breath of death.

But something interrupted this final blow.

“Wyvern Slash!”

A man’s clear, booming voice called out, and she saw two of the man-spider’s arms fly off, sending the massive blade tumbling into the wall of a nearby house.

“Ngaaaaaaaauuugh!!!”

The man-spider let out an enraged howl, lurching about as it searched for the person responsible, its gaze soon fixing on a point in the distance. Atonei looked in the same direction.

She caught sight of a knight decked out in gleaming silver armor, wielding a sword nearly as long as she was tall, which gave off a faint azure glow. He stood atop a building at the end of the street.

The silver knight swung his blade once more. “Wyvern Slash!”

His sword sliced through the air again, and several of the man-spider’s powerful legs were torn to shreds. The beast crashed to the ground with an infuriated scream.

The knight, his armor etched with intricate azure-and-white inscriptions, hopped down from the roof, the ground cratering beneath him from the force of his landing. He walked casually toward Atonei.

His rippling cloak was so dark that Atonei almost felt as if she were looking into the night sky. The way he carried himself made her think of a legendary hero.

The only thing that disrupted this image was the green, furry creature clinging to his helmet. Its eyes darted around, and it wagged its tail excitedly.

“Looks like I got here just in time. Hey, Chiyome!”

A small shadow appeared on a nearby rooftop, then bounded off toward Yahna.

“Wha?!”

Yahna stumbled, but the short, dark figure caught her before she fell.

The figure was a young girl with azure eyes dressed entirely in black—and not just any girl, but one of the beast people from the stories. Cat ears poked out of her sleek, black hair and a long, black tail extended from her lower back.

She wore a black mask over her face, gauntlets on her arms, and guards on her shins. Taken together with the dagger worn at her waist, the outfit made it clear that this tiny girl had been raised as a warrior.

She stepped between Yahna and the rapidly approaching infected man, then performed a series of movements with her hands.

“Body to water, aqua shuriken!”

Atonei couldn't get a clear look at what the girl had conjured, but whatever it was, it found its mark, blowing away a large chunk of the man's body.

That would almost certainly have killed him, had he been a normal man. But even with only half his body remaining, he continued to crawl toward his prey.

"I summon flaming stones to bore through my enemies!"

A woman's calm and confident voice pierced the air moments before a flaming stone came shooting up from the street, scoring a direct hit on the man atop the roof.

The power of the blow knocked the man off his feet, even as he was engulfed in flames. His body thudded to the ground as a charred husk. It wasn't long before the wind carried his ashes away.

Atonei had never seen magic in person before, but she knew enough to understand that that was what she'd just witnessed. She caught sight of the figure who'd shot the fireball walking down the cobblestone street, her heels clicking with each step.

She wore her snow-white hair tied back in a tight ponytail and was dressed in a robe covered in strange symbols. Atonei was surprised to note that the woman had golden eyes, amethyst skin, and long, pointed ears, as well as an incredibly attractive, well-toned figure.

The woman was clearly an elf, or "fallen one," as the church referred to them. However, Atonei saw none of the ugliness that the church so often preached about.

The elf extended a delicate finger and summoned a ball of fire in her hand. She shot it like a comet just above Atonei's head, where it found its mark square in the chest of an undead knight creeping up behind her. Flames engulfed the creature, reducing it to charred bones.

"I'll leave that one to you, Arc," she said, indicating a man-spider that had appeared above the party.

"I'm on it, Ariane," the silver knight said.

"Kyii!" The green creature atop his helmet let out a cheerful mew.

The sun reflected brilliantly off the knight's blade as he swung it down with a loud whoosh, cleaving the man-spider in two with a single slash. Its body crumpled to the ground, where it dissolved into black sludge. It didn't even have time to scream.

The hulking knight turned back to look at Atonei. "My name is Arc. Are you okay, miss?"

She looked up at him and blinked several times, her brain still rushing to comprehend everything happening around her. The one thing she *did* understand was that she was now out of danger. She began scanning the rooftops for her sister.

"Yahna! Yahna! Are you okay?"

She saw the young beast girl—Chiyome—bound off the wall with Yahna in her arms, landing effortlessly on the street.

"Yahna!"

"Atonei!"

The sisters pulled each other into a tight embrace.

"Are you all right? Were you hurt?"

Yahna nodded and shook her head in response to her sister's interrogation.

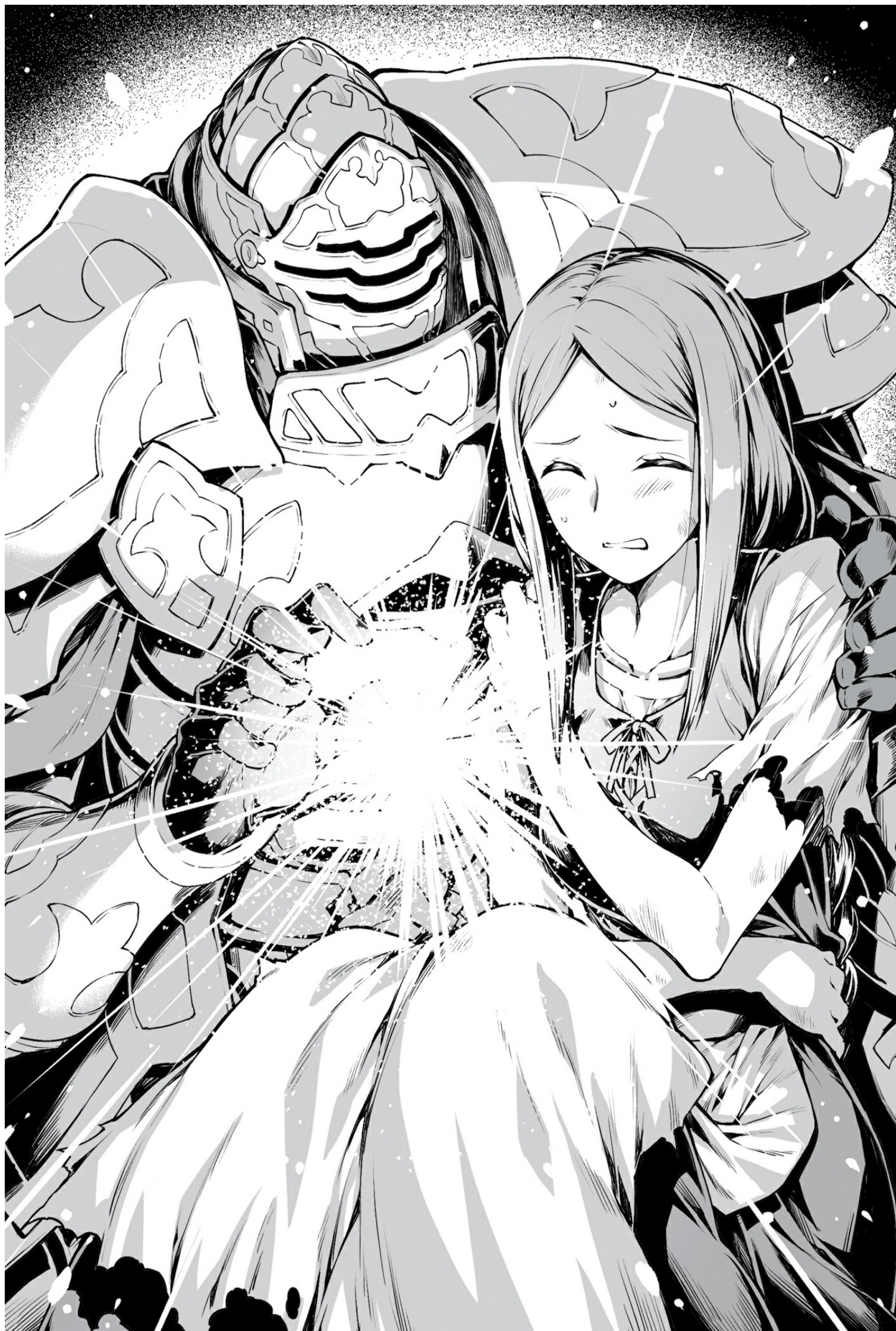
Atonei slumped to the ground, utterly exhausted. Now that the specter of death no longer hung over them, the pain in her back from her fall came flooding in.

She grimaced and let out a low groan. "Hnnngh..."

Yahna hurried to her side. "Atonei?"

"Did you hurt yourself while trying to escape?" The silver knight, Arc, knelt beside Atonei and put his hand over her. "Heal."

A warm light formed in the palm of his hand, enveloping Atonei's body before slowly dissipating.



The two sisters looked up at Arc in surprise. They'd seen such rituals performed by priests in the past and had been led to believe it was the power of God behind healing people's injuries and ills. But they'd never experienced something like this.

"How is it?" the knight asked. He leaned down closer to look Atonei in the face, the green creature still perched atop his head.

Atonei bowed, frantically searching for the right words, so as not to offend him. "Th-thank you so much, Sir Knight. I'm afraid I don't have much to offer you for the miracle you've bestowed upon me. If there's anything I can do, please tell me."

Arc tilted his head to the side in confusion at her sudden seriousness. Yahna swallowed hard.

Chiyome approached. "Usually you're expected to donate a great deal of money when a Hilk priest heals you. They have no money to pay, so they're offering to try to work off their debt."

Arc laughed and waved his hand casually. "I'm not a member of the church. No need to donate anything. More importantly, is the pain gone?"

"Y-yes, it's like it was never there." Atonei could hear the surprise in her voice as she replied.

Arc nodded, satisfied, looking back and forth between the girls. "Glad to hear it. Have you seen any other survivors out here?"

Atonei and Yahna exchanged a glance before shaking their heads.

"No, but we were being chased by that creature when we left our house, so we didn't really think to see if there was anyone else still alive. I'm sorry." Atonei felt awful about this failure.

Arc shook his head. "No need to be glum. We just need to clean up the rest of the undead."

He turned his attention to the green animal perched atop his head. "Any more bad guys in the area, Ponta?"

The creature perked up and began sniffing the air as it turned in a slow circle,

its tail wagging all the while.

“Kyii!”

“According to Ponta, we’ve taken out all the undead in this part of town. Now that it’s safe, any survivors should be able to get out on their own.”

Arc stood up and glanced around before sliding his sword back into its sheath.

Ariane brushed her beautiful white hair back, tying it in a ponytail. “It looks like this area is clear, but we can’t exactly bring these girls around with us. Why don’t we take them to the camp outside the city and then come back?”

Arc agreed and beckoned the sisters over. “I’m going to teleport you outside the city. Get in close to me, okay?”

Atonei wasn’t sure what he meant by “teleport,” but she took Yahna’s hand and stepped over to his side. She looked around intently as she tried to figure out what he planned to do. Ariane and Chiyome joined them.

Arc tilted his helmeted head, seemingly bemused, as he conjured his magic. “Transport Gate!”

A rune of light appeared beneath them, and then the world went black.

The darkness only lasted for a moment, however. When the girls could see again, they found themselves in an unfamiliar place.

“Huh?”

“Wha?”

They stared, wide-eyed, at their new surroundings and the large group of people moving busily about. Others, evidently exhausted, sat beneath the many large, spacious tents propped up in the clearing. Even without being told, the two girls knew that these people were the lucky individuals who’d managed to escape the holy city with their lives.

Though hardly a city’s worth of people, there were still quite a few survivors.

In addition to all the exhausted evacuees, there were also a great number of human soldiers bustling about. However, the girls quickly realized that none of them were wearing the uniforms of the templars or soldiers of the Holy Hilk

Kingdom.

In fact, the flag flying high over the tents wasn't that of the Hilk, either. Since they'd never been outside of Fehrbio Alsus, much less the Holy Hilk Kingdom, the sisters didn't recognize its colors.

They *did* notice, however, many elves, like Ariane, intermingled with the human soldiers...and even a few beast people, like Chiyome.

It was truly an unbelievable sight to those who'd lived under the church's teachings.

Humans and other species coming together to rescue the citizens of the holy city was completely incompatible with what the Hilk had taught them about non-humans.

Between the tragedy that had befallen the capital and all the things they were seeing beyond its protective walls, these two sisters' world had been both literally and figuratively ripped out from under them.

Atonei looked up at Arc, her voice unsteady as she spoke. "Umm, Sir Knight... wh-what happened to the city? We lived on the outskirts and heard a lot of commotion, but all I really know is that something bad happened."

Arc tilted his head from one side to the other. She didn't get the impression that he was about to lie to her, but rather that he didn't know how best to explain it. At least, this was the impression she got based on her many years of waiting on customers.

"Well, I guess when you get right down to it, the pontiff attacked several kingdoms and lost. He summoned some monsters here, which took the lives of many of the city's residents, to make his last stand and, well, that's what did the city in."

Arc turned looked off into the distance as he spoke. Following his gaze, Atonei saw that he was staring at the wall surrounding Fehrbio Alsus in the distance.

Everything the sisters had ever known was behind them. They'd lost their home. Atonei had lost her jobs. The odds that they'd ever return to the city seemed slim.

“Wh-what’s going to become of us?” Atonei finally gave voice to her fears. Though their lives had been saved, their future was unclear.

However, with her younger sister’s warm hand tightly clasped in her own, Atonei reminded herself that she couldn’t just sit here and feel sorry. She had to find a way to carry Yahna forward with her.

Arc crossed his arms and lowered his head in thought. “Unfortunately, I don’t have an answer for you. For now, I’ve been told to clear the undead out of the capital and rescue any survivors we can find. What becomes of those survivors shall be decided by people much more powerful than I am.”

Ariane nodded. “That’s right. It’ll take us some time to make the city livable again. We can’t just leave people out here waiting for that to happen. Most likely, the survivors will be split up and taken in by the different human kingdoms.”

Atonei let out a sigh of relief.

Assuming what they’d said was true, it meant that the holy kingdom had started *and* lost a war, all without them knowing a thing. The treatment of a rival’s citizenry varied a great deal depending on the victor—some even resorted to imprisonment or slavery—but that fortunately didn’t seem to be the case here.

“Moving the exhausted survivors will be a major logistical challenge, though. I’m betting Dillan’s going to ask for your help with that, Arc.”

Chiyome looked out across the survivors, most huddled up or otherwise resting.

Arc shrugged. “More than happy to use my teleportation magic. I’m just happy to have survived the battle, really.” After a short silence, he turned his attention back to the sisters. “Things are going to be tough for a while. Just hang in there, okay? I’ll come and check on you, but right now we need to get back to work. Till we meet again.”

Arc turned on his heel and marched away from the encampment with Ariane and Chiyome.

Atonei bowed her head toward their backs. Yahna jerkily followed suit in an

adorable imitation of her sister's formality.

"Thank you, Sir Knight!"

"Thanks!"

Arc casually waved a hand over his shoulder and stepped out into an empty space among the tents, where he once again summoned up a rune of light. The three of them disappeared from sight.

The sisters watched in silent astonishment, holding hands. After several moments, Atonei looked down at Yahna. "Well, why don't we go ask one of those soldiers if they have something to eat, huh?"

Yahna smiled and nodded eagerly.

The half-man/half-spider abomination let out a shrill howl as it swung its massive blade toward me.

I used Dimensional Step to teleport a short distance away and out of sight before swinging my own sword at the place where the human and spider parts met, cleaving the creature in two.

"Graaaaaaaaaaawwwrrrr!"

The man-spider let loose a bloodcurdling scream and stumbled about for a few moments before tumbling weakly to the ground and dissolving into black sludge.

As silence enveloped us once again, I looked around to see if there were any other enemies left.

Ariane was chopping through one undead soldier after another with her fiery sword. The moment the blade touched her enemies, they immediately burst into flames. Watching her work was nothing short of impressive, especially when compared to the way I recklessly waved my sword around.

"Looks like you've got your area taken care of!"

With that, Ariane chopped down the final undead soldier, shook the flame off her blade, and slid it into its sheath with a satisfying clink.

“Nicely done.”

I offered congratulatory applause for Ariane’s work, though she seemed less than impressed. Judging by the subtle twitch of her ears, she wasn’t happy with her performance.

She quickly changed the subject. “I wonder how things are going with Chiyome.”

Right at that moment, I heard the sound of a second-story window shattering and watched as an undead soldier came crashing down onto the stone pavement below, the jaws of a transparent wolf clenched tightly around its throat.

This was one of the water wolves created with Chiyome’s ninjutsu abilities.

Chiyome wasn’t far behind. She dove out of the same window, landing deftly on the street. “That’s the last of the undead lurking in the surrounding houses.”

The wolf wrenched the undead soldier’s neck back and forth until it finally broke, and the creature stopped moving entirely.

Chiyome was one of the six great warriors of the Jinshin clan, among the mountain people—a species the humans called beast people. These soldiers were no match for the likes of her.

In addition to my two highly skilled companions, I had one more person—or should I say animal?—available to assist in our hunt for the undead hiding in the capital.

In fact, it was already putting its skills to good use from its perch atop my head.

“Ponta’s a natural undead sensor.”

“Kyii! Kyii!” The cottontail fox mewed proudly at this praise.

Chiyome looked up at our furry companion. “You know, I always prided myself as having a more refined sense of smell than other mountain people, but it’s tough even for me to pick out where the undead are, what with the stench of death hanging over the city.”

Ponta wagged its tail even harder at this additional ego boost.

From what I'd been told, undead were generally created when powerful, evil magic came into contact with corpses. The mountain people were able to pick them out by the unique stench of death that emanated from their bodies, though that was proving challenging in the capital, since the entire city had become a battleground with a massive undead beast. Sniffing out the smaller, individual soldiers was difficult.

Elves, on the other hand, were able to identify the undead through the so-called "contamination of death," which clung to them like a shadow. However, this meant that the undead had to be within one's line of sight, making the skill unsuitable for tracking.

Ponta, on the other hand, was a spirit creature, which meant it could sense when other spirits were present.

I reached up and scratched Ponta's chin in appreciation. "I know Dillan sent us back here to rescue the remaining survivors, but it's starting to seem a lot more practical to just clear out the undead instead."

Ponta rubbed affectionately against my hand as I glanced around at the ghost town.

My slaying of the pontiff had marked the end of the battle between the Holy Hilk Kingdom and the Nohzan Kingdom. We'd been able to slay the pontiff's two undead giants with the help of the Dragon Lords, before they'd gone off to take care of the undead legions lurking outside the capital. With most of the enemies now cleared out, the holy city resembled a long-forgotten ruin.

Right as we'd been wrapping things up, refugees had begun to pour out of the capital in droves.

We'd thought that all of the capital's residents had been tragically killed at the hands of the giants, so we were pleased to see that many had actually survived. We quickly assembled a camp to house and protect them.

Dillan—Ariane's father, and the man in charge of leading the combined forces in the war effort—formed rescue parties from the elves from the Great Canada Forest and the Jinshin clan of the mountain people and sent them into the capital to search for survivors.

Each of these groups was a respectable fighting force in its own right and was able to pull double duty, by both wiping out the undead lurking within the city and also providing a positive example to the people who'd lived for so many years under the Hilk's teachings that humans were superior to all other species. This might not change their worldview overnight, but at least it was a starting point.

In fact, the two human girls we'd saved didn't seem to harbor any sort of negative feelings toward Ariane and Chiyome.

It had also been decided that the human kingdoms of Nohzan and Rhoden would take charge of protecting the refugees and running the camps. Not only did they have inferior fighting ability compared to the elves and mountain people; they also had far more soldiers available to take on such a massive endeavor.

"Even considering all the progress we've made, the capital's so massive that it's still going to take a long time to finish clearing up the undead." I mumbled to myself, staring at the ruins of the central cathedral off in the distance. "I'm worried the refugee camps might not be sustainable if they get much bigger."

Ariane followed my gaze and sighed. "You're probably right. Not that we'll be around to help. We're likely to be summoned as representatives of the Jinshin clan and the Great Canada Forest once we begin the talks about executing a treaty between our nations."

My shoulders slumped. "I really have no interest in such things."

Ariane looked up at me. "You'll be a great representative for Canada. Besides, everyone here knows just how powerful you are now. It would make the humans even more worried if they thought someone who can stand toe to toe with a Dragon Lord and come out the other side was running wild."

This caught me off guard. "Well, I guess there's some merit to me being there, then. You clearly got your impressive political acumen from your father."

Ariane averted her gaze and began tracing her finger in a large circle in the air.

"I, uh..." I stammered. "I mean...your grandfather said... He said something

like that. I don't really know for sure, you know? I mean, you see..."

She continued to trace an invisible circle while keeping me in her peripheral vision.

I chuckled. "I mean, I really like how direct you are."

"Kyii! Kyii!" Ponta gave its tail a powerful wag in agreement.

Ariane turned and started to walk away. "We don't have all day to gossip. Let's get going!"

"Sure thing."

"Kyii! Kyii!"

I took off after her.

"I'll find the next one," Chiyome said as she fell in line with Ariane. She seemed intent on beating Ponta to the punch this time. I found her competitive streak endearing, though it was also undoubtedly part of what made her such a formidable foe.

"Why don't we stick to the plan and head toward the central cathedral?"

Chiyome nodded.

In addition to rescuing any survivors remaining in the capital, we'd also been assigned another task, something that only we were to look for.

Pontiff Thanatos, the de facto ruler of the Holy Hilk Kingdom, was responsible for the war that had brought us here. Under him were seven cardinals, each of whom he'd created by his own hand as a powerful undead creature with their own unique abilities. Thus far, we'd confronted and killed five of his cardinals, but that still left two unaccounted for.

Assuming those two undead giants were the remaining cardinals, it would mean that the upper echelons of the Holy Hilk Kingdom had been completely wiped out. Personally, though, I had my doubts. I had no evidence, but the giants just didn't feel like any of the other cardinals we'd faced.

Dillan had tasked us with finding the remaining cardinals. After all, just because the pontiff was gone, it didn't mean that the cardinals would also

vanish. The fact that the undead he'd created were still roaming the streets was proof enough of that.

Undead that were able to think for themselves would likely choose either to hide or flee, in order to avoid meeting the same fate as the pontiff.

We'd searched churches and cathedrals throughout the holy city in hopes of finding a clue as to the whereabouts of the remaining cardinals.

Complicating matters was the fact that the cardinals were indistinguishable from other humans—except by the mountain people, who could smell their stench, and the elves, who could see their contamination.

Unfortunately, my battle with the pontiff in the cathedral had caused a great deal of destruction, so there was no guarantee that any information about the cardinals remained. But we couldn't simply let them go free.

"This is like beating the end boss and then having the story continue without an ending."

"Kyii?" Ponta's cotton-like tail brushed against my back quizzically.

We continued toward the central cathedral, killing any undead that popped up along the way.

Several of the cathedral's spires had been reduced to rubble during my battle with the pontiff, and the roof sported a massive hole, but other than that, the building seemed relatively stable.

"This place is huge," I said. "It's going to take forever to find information about the cardinals, assuming there's even anything here."

Chiyome tilted her head back to take in the whole cathedral. "The building's big, sure, but there aren't all that many places to check." With that, the young ninja stepped through the front entrance.

"Kyii! Kyii!"

I hurried after her with a little prodding from Ponta.

Brilliant rays of light cascaded through the damaged roof, illuminating the cathedral's ornate decorations. The whole building was utterly silent. The fact that this beautiful, sacred space had served as the center of a religion that had

so callously sacrificed its believers wasn't lost on me.

The great sanctuary took up much of the cathedral's interior. Just as Chiyome had said, it seemed unlikely that any secret information about the church would be hidden in a place where people came and went frequently. We'd best be served exploring the offices or libraries for information on the cardinals.

"Let's check out the back."

"Right."

At the rear of the sanctuary were two doors, one on either side, and beyond each a third, which led into two long, narrow hallways. We took the left one.

The passage we found ourselves in was rather unimpressive compared to the cathedral we'd just left, and only faintly lit, despite there still being plenty of daylight outside.

We continued until we reached a point where the two hallways came together and the passage expanded slightly.

This part of the cathedral was decorated with various holy accoutrements, memorabilia, and religious artwork, though none of them gave any hint as to where the cardinals might have gone. Even a portrait of one of them would have been a step in the right direction, but alas, there was nothing of the sort.

I didn't even know where to start our search. After all, it was hardly uncommon in this world for commoners not to know what their local lord or religious leader even looked like.

In an age without photographs or the internet, portraits and oral descriptions were the only way to know what someone you hadn't met looked like. Even then, portraits often bore little resemblance to the people depicted. Oral descriptions were even worse, as they tended to turn into a game of *Telephone* and could represent practically anyone.

Our best bet would be to talk with a high-ranking official within the church who personally knew the cardinals. But there didn't seem to be anyone left in the cathedral, nor had we found any such person during our cursory inspection of the refugee camp.

The only explanations I could think of were that either they'd all died in fighting or they'd escaped the capital. Perhaps they were also undead, like the cardinals.

I glanced into several rooms, but nothing stood out. In one of them, I flipped through a few books on one of the many shelves lining the wall, but they contained little of interest.

The final room we searched was all the way in the back of the building on the fourth floor. It was clear from its size and furnishings that this was someone's personal study. Perhaps it had belonged to the pontiff, or possibly it had been a cardinal.

The bookshelves were overflowing, and a large desk in the center of the room nearly buckled under stacks of maps and even more books. Unlike the other rooms, there were also magical items strewn about.

Ariane took a few books from the shelves and paged through before returning them. "The books aren't much different from the others we've seen."

"Kyii, kyiii!" Ponta shoved its head into a pile of parchment on the desk and began sniffing about wildly, as if on the hunt.

I picked up a magical item and turned it over in my hand, trying to figure out what it was used for.

Chiyome stalked the perimeter of the room in a half-crouch. I had no idea what she was looking for.

A few moments later, I heard a loud click and turned to find Chiyome standing with her hand buried in an old shelf.

"Found it."

Chiyome pulled her hand out and then pushed on the neighboring bookshelf, which slid to the side, revealing a metal box embedded in the wall.

"Whoa, a hidden safe?"

Its presence felt a bit trope-y, but I was impressed all the same. There was something about a hidden safe in a far-flung room that I found incredibly exciting.

“Good job, Chiyome! The key’s gotta be around here somewhere.”

Ariane set her book down, eyeing Chiyome’s find with great interest.

The safe was quite large, about as tall as Chiyome, and had a single keyhole right in the front. It didn’t look like there was any way to bypass the lock, though, to be fair, an easily opened safe would be pretty pointless.

I clasped my hands and cracked my knuckles. “I could always break the door open.”

I could either tear my way through with my bare hands or stab my Holy Thunder Sword of Caladbolg into the gap between the safe and the door and try to wrench it open that way. As long as the safe wasn’t made of mythical-class materials, we’d be fine.

Chiyome immediately shot that plan down. “That won’t be necessary, Arc. A lock like this shouldn’t present much of a challenge.”

She pulled two narrow pins from her pocket, slid them into the lock, and began to rattle them around. After only a few moments, I heard a loud clack, and the massive door creaked open.

Ariane and I couldn’t help but clap.

“Impressive! Like a master thief!”

“Good job, Chiyome! I was just going to try to melt the thing with fire.”

Chiyome’s cat ears twitched atop her head, and her tail wagged excitedly. “It’s nothing, really. Pretty much all of the Jinshin clan members can do it. Anyway, let’s take a look inside.” She didn’t usually show her emotions, but she was clearly embarrassed.

Only then did I realize what Ariane had said. If she’d used fire to melt a hole in the safe, it likely would have incinerated everything inside as well. She could be quick to charge ahead without thinking things through. Not that I was one to talk.

I reached out to give Chiyome a hand with the hefty door.

“Whoa...”

The safe was filled with countless gold coins, cloth bags filled with even *more* gold, and various other valuable treasures. There was a huge fortune amassed right here in the central cathedral.

Judging by the sheer scale of the holy capital and the church itself, though, this couldn't be more than a drop in the bucket. Was this just one person's wealth?

"Well, none of this looks like it'll be of any use in tracking down the cardinals." Ariane's shoulders slumped, dejected.

While she was right that this wasn't what we were looking for, it could still be of great use to us.

"We might as well bring it all back with us."

Ariane's eyes went wide. "Huh? But you already have more money in the village than you'll ever be able to spend. What would you even do with this?"

I shook my head. "No, not for me. I was thinking we could give this to Dillan to distribute to the refugees. This will at least help them get back on their feet, whether it's rebuilding the capital or buying whatever they need to settle elsewhere."

I piked up a coin, watching the sunlight reflect off of it. It was nowhere near the quality of the gold minted by the elves, but the markings on it were crisp and clear.

Besides, it wasn't only the refugees who'd need money. If we could distribute this gold to the human soldiers who'd joined our forces, that would also help reduce each country's burden. The Nohzan and Salma kingdoms in particular had been hard hit by the Holy Hilk Kingdom and would have to deal with strife and discord along their borders.

It would still be some time before everything was back to normal. Any amount of money to aid in restoration would be a great help.

"You've got a point. If the respective kingdoms don't have enough money to rebuild, then the church could easily start amassing power again. Is that what you're getting at?" Ariane looked at me intently.

I felt like I'd heard this story somewhere before. "Exactly!" I figured I might as well agree with her, so I nodded my head enthusiastically.

"Hmm... Is there anything else in here that might tell us where the cardinals went?"

While Ariane and I talked things over, Chiyome continued to dig through the contents of the safe, disinterestedly dumping out bags of gold as she went.

Her people had been driven out and persecuted by most other nations, so they had little use for money, since they didn't engage in any form of trade beyond their own borders. Gold coins were probably little more than shiny metal as far as she was concerned.

Chiyome paused for a moment to peer into a leather bag, which she swiftly handed to Ariane. "Do you know what this is?"

Ariane pulled out its contents—a crystal the size of a baby's fist.

But this wasn't any normal crystal. It gave off a faint glow and had several runes etched inside it.

Ariane squinted at it. "It's imbued with magic. I know that much. But I have no idea what it would be used for." She shrugged and slid it back into the bag. "Well, we should at least bring it back with us to show it to someone who knows more about magical items."

I took the leather bag from Ariane and tossed it into one of the sacks filled with gold.

While I was preparing to bring all these items back with us using teleportation, I heard Ponta cry out excitedly from elsewhere in the room.

"Kyii! Kyii!"

I glanced behind me to find the fox with its jaws locked around the handle of a drawer, slowly dragging it open to reveal a cloth bag. I strode over, reached down, and opened the bag—only to be greeted by a sweet scent. It was filled with dried fruit.

"I should've seen that coming. There's no one better than you when it comes to sniffing out food."

“Kyii!”

Ponta puffed up at this and swung its tail back and forth with pride.

I pulled a piece of fruit out of the bag and held it out. The cottontailed fox leaped up and snagged it from my hand, munching hungrily on the morsel and vigorously wagging its tail.

It seemed to have taken a liking to whatever this was. I’d never seen fruit like this back in the markets in Rhoden. Perhaps it was unique to this region?

Ariane jealously watched my interaction with Ponta, but I decided to ignore her for the moment. I cinched the bag shut and tied it to the fox’s neck.

“Here you go, Ponta. The spoils of war. You’ve earned it.”

“Kyiiiiiii, kyiii, kyiiiiiii!”

I left Ponta hopping around excitedly and returned to the safe.

Try as we might, however, we didn’t uncover anything that would aid in our mission.

“I don’t think we’re going to find anything else of note here.”

I sat down on one of the gold-filled bags, but much to my regret, it felt nothing like the beanbag chair I’d been half-expecting. Probably because it was full of hard metal.

“The sun’s going to set soon. Why don’t we drop this stuff off?”

Ariane stretched luxuriously and let out a yawn. She tossed a few books onto the pile we were taking with us. I couldn’t say what we stood to gain by learning about the church’s teachings, but I figured Dillan might have asked her to grab them.

Chiyome performed one last sweep of the room to make sure we weren’t missing anything before returning to our assembled bags. Both women signaled that they were ready.

“Well, then, let’s get going.”

I stood up from my uncomfortable makeshift sofa and summoned Transport Gate.

Once we were back at the refugee camp, Chiyome immediately headed off in search of Goemon, her comrade in arms.

I hefted our bags and accompanied Ariane to the large tent at the center of the camp. This was where all the people in charge could be found.

Once inside, we set the bags down in front of Dillan.

“Oh, welcome back. It’s been a long day, huh?”

Not only was Dillan the elder of the elven village of Lalatoya, but he was also Ariane’s father. Dillan had green-tinged blond hair and long, pointed ears, though most notable was the fact that, unlike his dark elf daughter, he had a markedly pale complexion. He wore priestly robes inscribed with mystical symbols, eschewing the martial tradition that Glenys, his wife and Ariane’s mother, followed.

He glanced over the items we’d brought back. “To help the humans rebuild? Well, that’s quite a good idea, I’d say. It doesn’t require much work on our end, and the money will prove immensely useful to the survivors. I’ll talk it over with the officials from the Rhoden Kingdom and let you know our final decision.”

After pausing for a moment, he reached out and opened the smaller leather bag. “This is certainly some kind of magical implement, but I’m afraid I can’t tell anything beyond that. If it was in a hidden safe like you say, then it must be quite important. I’ll give this to the high elders and have one of our experts in Maple analyze it. Anyway, the humans have agreed to conduct a search for the cardinals in their own domains, so all hope isn’t lost.”

To be honest, I was a little disappointed that we wouldn’t know what this magical implement was for a while.

Dillan slid it back into the bag and turned his attention to where I was standing, off to the side, out of the way of our haul.

“It will still be some time until we’re able to rescue all the survivors remaining within the city, but I was hoping that you could escort me back to Saureah. Representatives from the human kingdoms, the mountain people, and the elves will be gathering to ratify the treaty. We would like you to be there.”

I recalled the conversation I’d had with Ariane back in the city. “I’m not really

excited about it, but I see no problem with making an appearance.”

Dillan offered me a broad smile. “Thank you, Arc.”

He’d done so much for me that I could hardly refuse. Besides, this was the first time in history that people of so many different species were coming together in peace, so it probably wouldn’t hurt to be there...if for no other reason than to provide extra protection in case anyone was planning something untoward.

I was just happy that it didn’t sound like I’d need to make a speech or anything.

Once we were finished with our report, Ariane and I left the tent. She let out a loud, exaggerated yawn. The night was pitch-black, interrupted only by the fires that continued to rage in the city off in the distance. The silhouettes of the empty, decrepit city looked like a series of towering headstones lined up in a row.

The refugee camp, on the other hand, boasted even more people than when we’d been here earlier that afternoon. It was starting to get pretty cramped.

Obviously, I was happy to see all the survivors gathered together, but when I remembered that this was a mere tenth...no, *hundredth* of the city’s original population, I was struck by the sheer weight of the pontiff’s actions. I felt a slight pang at the realization that, had *no one* survived, I might never have even considered the gravity of what had occurred.

“We really need to decide what to do with these people,” I said.

“It’s not our concern,” Ariane replied. “The elders will take care of that. For now, I just want to find Chiyome, head back to the village, and get something to eat. I’m starved.”

“Kyii! Kyii!” Ponta mewed in agreement with Ariane and batted its paws against the top of my helmet for added emphasis.

While I was grappling with the reality of the devastation we’d witnessed—and also wrought—Ariane and Ponta seemed to be their normal selves.

Maybe they were right. It was better to focus on the task at hand than wallow

in the unfairness of the world. We'd get something to eat, take a bath, and then think about next steps.

It seemed like we'd be busy for some time yet. And that suited me just fine.

I turned my attention away from the capital and followed Ariane off to the mountain people section of the camp to search for Chiyome.

Chapter 2:

New Developments and Great Forests

I WOKE UP EARLY in the morning, before the low-hanging fog had a chance to burn off. The air at the top of the mountain was chilly, and the breeze blowing across my skin only made me colder.

I plunged into the overflowing outdoor bath to try to warm up.

I'd returned to my abandoned mountain shrine, far away from the fallen capital of the Holy Hilk Kingdom.

I'd come back here after we'd cleared the city of the remaining undead and dealt with getting the treaty signed in the Nohzan Kingdom, in the hopes of finally taking a break.

Unfortunately, neither the Nohzan Kingdom nor the Salma Kingdom could come up with a good solution for dealing with the survivors, and the conversations had stalled out.

This wasn't exactly unexpected. After all, the two countries had been enemies until just a short while ago, and they'd only allied because of exceptional circumstances. Nothing had fundamentally changed.

What's more, the Nohzan Kingdom's neighbors had all lost their leaders in the Holy Hilk Kingdom's invasion. It would be weeks, months, maybe even *years* before the regions found any semblance of stability.

With the controlling institutions in each of the countries gone, chaos reigned. Flooding them with refugees would only complicate matters.

I couldn't help but wonder what would become of the two sisters we'd saved. The more I thought about it, the darker my mood became.

I let out a heavy sigh and scooped up some warm water to scrub my face. "There's nothing quite like a morning dip, but it's emotionally draining to return to my elven body."

The mystical waters filling the hot spring at the base of the Lord Crown were

said to remove curses. And in fact, they did. Merely dipping into the warm water turned my skeletal body back to one of flesh and blood—while also bringing all of my emotions and senses into focus. In this state, though still an elf, I looked different from the other elves who inhabited this world, what with my black hair, red eyes, brown skin, and pointed ears.

I leaned back and let the rising steam envelop me.

The massive treetop of the Lord Crown filled the sky above me, swaying back and forth with the wind. I wished I could just lose myself in the moment.

Alas, someone had other plans than to let me soak in the wonders of the universe and took it upon themselves to bring me back to reality.

“Kyii! Kyii!”

Ponta summoned up a gust of wind, using its spirit magic to coast above the surface of the water, mewling cheerfully. It landed atop my head like a seagull perching on an outcropping of rock in the middle of the sea.

“Oy, Ponta! My head isn’t a rest stop, you know.”

Ponta’s water-logged tail slapped against the front of my face, covering my nose and mouth. I squirmed and spluttered, trying to breathe. My furry companion dropped down to my shoulders and clung stubbornly to my neck in response.

“Kyii!”

Ponta ignored my grumblings and stuck out a paw, beckoning. It often did this when it wanted to show me something.

I turned in the direction Ponta was indicating and spotted Ariane, standing at the entrance to the open-air bath. I stood, holding Ponta up by the scruff of the neck.

“Oh, hey, Ariane. Do you need something?”

Ariane quickly spun away, averting her eyes. “Whoa, Arc! I don’t need to see you like that!”



I realized what I'd done and quickly ducked beneath the water again. "Ah, sorry about that! But, uh, what brought you here?"

Ariane returned her gaze to me, letting out a sigh. "Nothing in particular. I just followed Ponta. Chiyome said she wanted to check in on the village. I figured it's about time that we eat breakfast and get ready to head out."

Today's plans came back to me. The mountain people were building a new village off to the east of this shrine, to house all those who'd escaped persecution.

The Jinshin clan had sent all their best carpenters to start building homes there. Naturally, Chiyome wanted to check on their progress.

For my part, I hoped to talk to some of the craftspeople and see if they might help me with some construction projects at the shrine. Obviously, I didn't want to bother anyone when work on the village had only just begun, but I figured I should be able to get a few people to help me out in between the other work they were doing.

It was about time I got myself a roof that actually kept out the rain, and I was also hoping to make a proper set of furniture to spruce up the place.

As it was, I only came here to soak in the hot spring or retrieve some of the water before returning to Ariane's home in Lalatoya to spend the night.

No matter how kind her family may be, I couldn't live as a freeloader in their home forever. Now that the whole Hilk ordeal had finally settled down, I figured now was the perfect time to change that. But my plans hinged on the progress in the new settlement.

"Ah, that's right. We should probably start getting ready."

"Kyii!"

I stepped out from the bath with Ponta, eliciting another loud yelp from Ariane before she turned to leave. In my defense, I was so used to spending my days as a skeleton that I no longer saw any issue with being naked. I guess that was also part of my curse.

For breakfast, Chiyome had prepared a soup of small woodland creatures

she'd caught and boiled together with some beans.

The dish only increased my desire to finally get a roof over this place so I could start to do my own cooking.

"Thanks for helping out today, Arc."

Chiyome bowed her head, her cat ears twitching.

I chuckled. "Oh, it's nothing. There are some things I'd like to take care of as well."

Chiyome nodded knowingly. I'd already asked her to put in a good word for me with the craftspeople, after all.

Since I'd visited the settlement before and sketched a picture of where I planned to teleport to in my notebook, it was pretty simple to teleport back.

Once we finished breakfast, I used my long-distance teleportation spell, Transport Gate, and returned to the settlement with Ariane, Ponta, and Chiyome in tow.

The settlement was built near a lake surrounded by the Furyu, Hyoryu, and Karyu mountain ranges—towering masses of earth that no one dared traverse, since they served as the homes of powerful dragons. The lake stretching out beneath these mountains was so vast that you could easily mistake it for an inland sea.

The area they'd chosen was a wide-open plain surrounded by mountains, which provided a natural defensive line. If they put all of their efforts into building this place up, they could probably support a fairly large population.

After suffering persecution at the hands of the humans and having to live in small, hidden settlements, a place like this could really offer relief to the mountain people.

Though we'd recently signed a treaty between the mountain people, the elves, and the humans back in the Nohzan Kingdom, it would still be some time before these folks could rest assured that the peace would last.

Now that the humans had agreed to cease their persecution, it was in the mountain people's best interests to build up their forces, should the need arise

to resist the humans in the future. And with such a massive plot of land all to themselves, I had no doubt that they could easily build their own kingdom out here.

Indeed, on the southern continent, the mountain people—or beast people, as they were called down there—ruled most of the lands.

If the mountain people here took advantage of their superior martial skills, they could create such a force to be reckoned with that even the ruling powers of the dueling Revlon empires would be hesitant to stand against them.

The only real challenge they faced was the fact that this place was a little *too* fortified. They were practically closed off from the outside world. But I figured that wouldn't be a problem for now.

After getting our bearings, we started making our way toward the peninsula that jutted out into the lake. Things had changed quite a bit since I'd first drawn my sketch of the landscape.

From where I stood, I could spot four or five wooden structures that appeared to be houses and an outer wall made up of thick wooden logs joined together. They reminded me of the hidden village I'd seen back in the Calcut Mountains.

"Well, I'll be. They've built a settlement out of nothing."

Ariane agreed with my assessment. "I know. It's really coming together."

Judging by their progress, it wouldn't be long before they could spare some craftspeople.

"Kyii! Kyii!" From the mewling and enthusiastic wagging of its tail, it was evident that Ponta had picked up on something of interest.

I noticed a wisp of smoke rising from one corner of the village, and for a moment, I feared that one of the buildings might be on fire. But a moment later, I caught the familiar scent of smoked fish.

With such a massive lake so close at hand, it didn't seem like they'd suffer any shortage of seafood.

As far as I could tell, they were using the smoke to preserve their catch. Ponta's finely tuned food sensors picked up on the smell immediately.

“Well, let’s get going.” Chiyome stepped out in front of us to lead the way.

It wasn’t long until we ran into two guards at the outer wall. They recognized us and offered a cheery greeting.

“Ooh, Chiyome! I see you brought Arc and Ariane with you.”

The first person to speak was a short man with a deep, intimidating voice. This was Pittah, the battle-scarred military commander of the hidden village back in the Calcut Mountains. The long-time soldier was missing half of one of his long, rabbit-like ears, and he wore a menacing expression on his face, even when he was smiling.

“Kyiiiiiii.”

Ponta wasn’t terribly fond of the man and immediately curled up behind my neck, hiding from him. Pittah seemed somewhat hurt by this reaction, though I found it endearing.

The other guard was Rowze, a bear woman so massive that she could give Goemon a run for his money in a contest of strength. In fact, she’d probably win.

She wore leather armor dyed a bright shade of red over her light-brown skin, and she could be identified by the half-circle ears atop her head and the little round tail protruding from her lower back. These features looked adorable on their own, but no human would dare take such a hulking figure lightly.

On her back was a massive axe that could easily cleave a person in two. This was no mere decoration either—she’d use it on a moment’s notice.

Rowze called out to me cheerfully. “And what brings you here today, Arc?”

“I’m accompanying Chiyome.”

She turned her attention to the little ninja.

“I’m here to check on the construction and provide Master Hanzo with a report,” Chiyome said. “I also want to see if you need any supplies. How do you find this place? As far as I can tell, there don’t seem to be any large monsters around.”

Pittah ran a finger along his chin. “The plains are filled with small animals and

some decently sized beasts, but little in the way of monsters. We've spotted a grand dragon near the lake a few times, but they tend to stay away from the village. For now, at least."

Rowze nodded. "The settlement is still pretty small, and we haven't run into any major problems, but it's absolutely going to keep growing. Eventually, we may need to smack that giant brute around."

The grand dragon they spoke of lived out on these plains and in the neighboring forests. At first glance, it looked like a monstrous, four-eyed frog, standing around ten to twenty meters tall, with a shell on its back made of stone and a long, spike-tipped tail.

We'd run across a similar dragon the very first time we came out here. Pittah, Rowze, Chiyome, and Goemon had teamed up to take the thing down while Ariane and I stood on the sidelines and watched.

Under normal circumstances, these grand dragons could easily lay waste to a village or two, but I didn't think there were any grave concerns, considering the people living here.

With proper treatment, a grand dragon's hide could be used to make leather armor that was stronger and more durable than metal. So even if they *were* attacked, they could use the spoils to strengthen themselves against the next strike.

In fact, Ariane was wearing grand dragon leather armor as we spoke.

The fact that the mountain people could take down a powerful beast like a grand dragon with such a small group was a testament to their fighting prowess. It was little wonder that the humans viewed them as a threat.

Before coming here, I probably would have seen them the same way.

Even with a treaty in place, it would still be no small feat to bridge the gap between humans and their counterparts. The typical fantasy concept of a world in which all manner of species lived together in harmony seemed so far off that I wondered if I'd ever see it.

I caught sight of Ariane waving her hand in front of my face, waking me from my reverie. "You daydreaming or something?"

“No, I was just lost in thought.” I tried to dismiss her suspicion with a casual wave of my hand.

“That’s fine, I guess. It’s pretty much the norm for you anyway. But we should go and check out the village. The plan was to take Chiyome back to her mountain hideout once she’s done here, right?”

“Ah, yes. I also wanted to check in with the carpenters while we’re here. Let’s hurry along.”

Pittah and Rowze led our small party into the village, where we were greeted by the rhythmic sounds of wooden mallets as people worked to assemble houses and other buildings.

From the workers applying the roofing tiles to those slathering a mud-like substance on the walls, the whole place was full of activity and animated voices. Off in the distance, I saw a group holding ropes and pulling a massive pole up into a standing position.

It looked as if everyone in the village other than the two we’d found standing guard was busy working. People would greet us as they passed, but they were all too busy to stop and talk. It seemed like it was still too early to try to secure some workers for my projects.

Pittah’s face contorted into a sinister look that I took for a smile. “We finally got a few buildings up that can shelter us from the elements, but there’s still a long way to go. It takes several folks working day and night just to build one house, and then we also need to spare a few people to run trials to secure food.”

Ariane cocked her head quizzically. “Trials?”

When we were first setting this place up, I purchased a large supply of food from the port city of Lamburt in the Rhoden Kingdom to support the initial settlers. That should have been enough to last them some time, but now I had my doubts.

Pittah seemed to read my mind and shook his head. “No, no, we still have much of the food you procured for us. We were just looking to increase the number of settlers here so that we have a few extra hands and our workers can

get a little sleep. That's why we need more food. We can't rely on you forever."

Rowze pointed toward the edge of the village. "Most of our work so far has involved cultivating fields next to the village, fishing in the lake, and sending out parties to explore what kind of flora and fauna are available in the nearby forests. Fishing in particular has become an important food source for us."

Ariane and I nodded. Since the population of the village would only increase, securing stable sources of food that could support such growth was a vital task.

Of course, I didn't *mind* going out and buying food for them, but I could see that it would soon become unsustainable. Besides, I couldn't dedicate myself to helping them out full time.

As it was, my ability to transport people and supplies using teleportation magic was in high demand as we picked up the pieces after the war. Honestly, I felt like I'd turned into a professional transport company.

The Holy Hilk Kingdom incident was just one example of how my teleportation abilities had sped up processes that would normally have taken months, if not years, here in this world.

Even though I was only temporarily offering my assistance, I could tell that I'd impacted the speed at which events had developed. Were it not for my ability to teleport all of the forces in to join the battle, the Nohzan Kingdom and its neighboring countries would have fallen to the Holy Hilk Kingdom, making it all the more difficult to take down the pontiff.

But the impact was severely limited by the fact that I was the only one who could do this. No wonder the mountain people had decided that they didn't want to rely on me forever.

Then again, these were people who'd been persecuted and even enslaved by humans. After surviving under such harsh conditions, perhaps self-reliance was a source of pride for them.

"Now that they've got a few houses built and food sources sorted out, perhaps we should bring over a few more people from the village to help out." Chiyome, unaware of just how far off track my mind had wandered, got to work inspecting the village and making suggestions for next steps.

Pittah's face twisted into a leer. It was obvious what he was thinking.

Aside from Rowze and a handful of other women, most of the people here were men. Clearly Pittah thought that "more people" meant more women. I'd seen no shortage of beauties back in the hidden village, so I had little doubt that they'd improve the liveliness of this new settlement. They might even encourage men like Pittah to work even harder.

"You're not being weird again, are you, Arc?"

"Kyii?"

I could feel Ariane glaring at me through heavy-lidded eyes, so I quickly turned my attention to a nearby building under construction.

The way the processed lumber was locked together to form the shell of the building spoke to the carpenters' high level of skill. However, there was something about the building that seemed strange to me.

"You know, I was wondering about something. I didn't bring much lumber here to the settlement initially, so where are you procuring it from?"

Obviously there were a lot of trees in the area, but none of the lumber used to build these houses looked like it was freshly cut. In fact, it had all been properly dried and processed.

I'd only tossed out the question to try to get out from under the pressure of Ariane's intimidating glare, but Chiyome responded in good faith.

"Members of the Jinshin clan must have used their ninjutsu powers to dry out the lumber. It's one of the basic techniques taught to us by the founder."

Pittah and Rowze both nodded, confirming Chiyome's speculations.

"Wow...that's pretty useful."

Under normal circumstances, it could take several months before cut wood could dry out enough to be useful in construction, but magic allowed them to greatly accelerate the process.

Back in my world, we'd managed to achieve the same results through chemical means. However, magic had the added benefit of not requiring massive facilities.

Not one to be outdone, Ariane chimed in. “The elves use spirit magic to remove moisture from wood, too, you know.”

She smiled triumphantly and puffed out her chest. There was something endearing about the sight.

Elven magic and the Jinshin clan’s ninjutsu both ultimately relied on a connection to the spirits. It made sense that they would be used similarly.

“Interesting. So can you do it, too?” I asked out of idle curiosity, but the confident grin on Ariane’s face quickly faded.

She turned away, nervously tapping her index fingers together. “W-well, the spirit I entered into a covenant with only has control over fire and earth. I’m not really strong with water-related magic...”

Even if she *had* been proficient in such magic, it was hard to imagine Ariane using it to perform menial tasks. She seemed much better suited for powerful, offensive magic.

I glanced at Chiyome. “So if we ever need any water magic, it’d be best to ask Chiyome.”

She specialized in water elemental ninjutsu techniques and could target with great precision. Or at least...I’d thought so. I was surprised to see Chiyome’s ears droop.

She scratched her head. “Sure, I’m pretty good with water elemental techniques, but this kind of ninjutsu has always been a weak point for me.”

Ariane voiced my thoughts. “Hunh. You seem really skilled from what I’ve seen.”

“Our founder believed that these types of techniques were great practice for ninjutsu, particularly for controlling our power levels. Kind of like killing two birds with one stone. But pulling moisture out of wood is very delicate work that requires you to maintain a certain power level over a long period of time. Whenever I tried, I always just ripped all of the moisture out at once, destroying the wood in the process.”

Ariane seemed to identify with what she was saying. “I think maybe the bond

between you and your water spirit is so strong that it's easier for you to manipulate large amounts of power than to do intricate tasks that require control. I'm pretty similar in that respect."

Ariane took Chiyome's hand, and the two of them smiled over this shared bond.

"So you two are both bad at limiting your power, huh?"

No sooner had my offhand comment left my lips than Ariane was jabbing a finger at me. "You're one to talk! If anyone can't keep their power under control, it's you!"

I knew that. In fact, I'd made my comment in commiseration with like-minded people, though apparently she hadn't taken it that way.

Alas, all I could do was raise my hands in defeat.

"Kyii! Kyii!" Ponta chimed in from atop my head to get my attention.

"What is it, Ponta?"

A young wolf man was jogging over to us.

Ariane watched the newcomer with curiosity. "I wonder what happened."

All I could do was shrug.

"I'm sorry to interrupt." The wolf man bowed in my direction before turning to Pittah. "Some members of the fishing party we sent out this morning haven't returned."

Pittah and Rowze both frowned at the news.

"Maybe they just haven't made it back yet," Rowze said

The wolf man shook his head. "With so many unexplored areas around us, we've made it clear that every group should return by noon. None of the other members of the fishing party have seen them, so we're starting to worry that something happened to them."

"Do we know who's missing?" Pittah asked

"Yes. Everyone on the boat that Gin boarded."

Rowze tilted her head back and gazed up at the sky.

Gin was a soldier and part of the advance party that had originally come out here. He was also a wolf man, similar to the one standing before us.

I recalled Rowze giving him special attention, like an affectionate older sister.

She let out a heavy sigh. “Dammit. I can’t believe it.”

Pittah clapped her on the back several times. “He always was an overly curious sort, so it’s not out of the realm of possibility that something caught his eye and he completely forgot what he was supposed to be doing. Then again, we still don’t know what’s lurking in the waters. We should prepare for the worst and try to rescue them, assuming they need it.”

Chiyome immediately volunteered. “If we’re sending a search party, I want to join. Water’s my specialty, after all.”

I looked out at the expansive lake ahead of us. It was perfectly flat, and there was absolutely nothing obscuring our view. The fact that we couldn’t see them practically guaranteed that something bad had happened.

If there *was* a monster lurking in the lake, it would likely attack the mountain people during their search. If it did, Chiyome could use her water elemental ninjutsu to defend them.

Pittah and Rowze were incredibly gifted fighters, but boats made for uneven footing. Magic users were most suitable for a job like this.

“I’d like to join the search as well.” I still wasn’t any good at keeping my power in check, on land or sea, but I could still help.

Chiyome quickly and firmly shook her head. “No, this is our problem. We can’t keep dragging you into this.”

Given that this was a simple search for a handful of people, and nowhere near the same level of effort as when I’d helped save a large number of her comrades in Rhoden’s capital, she probably didn’t feel it was appropriate to ask for my assistance.

I thought of it as helping out a friend, but she seemed uncomfortable with me always coming to her aid.

Pittah and Rowze both nodded, seemingly in agreement with her. Perhaps I should put some kind of condition on the deal to get them to let me help.

“All right, then. What if you do me a favor in exchange? I have teleportation magic, after all, so I can easily bring you back to the village once we find the missing people.”

Chiyome looked at me in surprise. “Arc, are you about to ask about carpenters?”

I couldn’t tell if she was able to read my mind or just extremely observant, but I nodded. “I’d like to borrow one carpenter for a bit as payment. Oh, and I want one of the people who caused you so much distress to serve as their assistant.”

Pittah belted out a loud guffaw at this. “I see no problem with that, Chiyome. Besides, Gin and the rest will need to make up for all the heartache they’ve caused. This is perfect.”

Chiyome bowed to me. “Thank you for always coming to our aid, Arc. I’ll start getting ready.”

She took off toward the lake at a dash.

I caught Ariane’s gaze. She’d stayed silent throughout the entire exchange, though from the way her cheeks were puffed out, it seemed like there was something she wanted to say.

“So I guess you’ll be staying...” I began.

“Oh, I’m going! As if there were any doubt!”

“Why are you so upset, Ariane?”

“None of your business.” She puffed her cheeks out even more and elbowed me in the side.

Chiyome and Ariane were both relatively young warriors by their respective species’ standards and had seemed to bond over that. Perhaps Ariane was angry that I’d butted in before she had a chance to volunteer.

I’d have to be more careful in the future.

“Sorry, Ariane. I just really wanted to help Chiyome out. Can we talk about

this later? We should focus on searching for the missing people right now.”

“That’s not it.” Ariane started off in the direction Chiyome had gone.

I watched her back for a few moments as I puzzled over her words.

“Kyii!”

At Ponta’s insistence, I started after Ariane and Chiyome. By the time I arrived at the lake, Chiyome had finished all the prep work. We met at the point where the lake came closest to the village. A long, wooden jetty stretched out into the water, and several tiny boats were docked to it.

These boats, if you could even call them that, resembled dugout canoes made from massive logs. The mountain people had clearly gone with a simple design, since they didn’t have the people to spare for anything more elaborate.

It would be an incredibly tight fit to get me into one of them.

“We’ll check out the surrounding area.”

Several members of the fishing party—wolflike in appearance, similar to Gin—hopped into two of the boats.

They worked the oars easily and moved gracefully across the lake.

Unlike the cat people of the Jinshin clan, the wolf people had little need for boats. Despite this, they’d grown quite adept at maneuvering them. They must have practiced since moving here.

If the wolf people, who were a lot closer to me in stature than the other mountain people, were able to travel around in these canoes, I figured I could do it too. The bear-like Rowze, on the other hand, would be a different story.

“I guess Chiyome, Ariane, and I should take a boat and head on out as well?”

Ponta dove off my head and landed on the bow of the nearest boat before turning to look back at me. “Kyii! Kyii!”

I laughed at the fox’s insistence on being a member of the crew.

“Right, right. Of course you’re coming with us.”

Ariane and Chiyome stepped aboard next. Thanks to their years of training, they seemed to have no problem maintaining their balance.

“Well, let’s get going.”

The moment I set foot inside it, the boat immediately dipped lower into the water, though it seemed like it would be able to support the weight of my armor just fine.

I picked the oars up and started to row, the boat creaking ever so slightly as we moved through the water.

“You’re veering right, Arc.”

Ariane was sitting at the bow, keeping an eye on our progress.

I’d noticed this myself, but given that my only experience with rowing was a few paddles around the park, I didn’t know how to properly maintain a heading.

“I know, but...well, it’s hard. Do either of you know how to row?”

They both shook their heads. Clearly we’d made a poor choice in choosing who rode in which boat, but I didn’t want to head back and find someone to row for us. I had no choice but to figure it out as I went.

After snaking our way through the water for a while, I began to get the hang of it. It wasn’t just a matter of rowing. You also needed to use the oars like rudders after you pushed. I would row, correct the course, and then repeat the process once we were heading straight. It was actually kind of fun.

I started to really get into it, and before I knew it, we were quite far from the coast. The settlement was so small that I had to squint to see it.

“I know we came out here to look for them, but all I see is water. I don’t even know where to start looking.”

Ariane leaned forward, looking back and forth with Ponta.

“Kyiii?”

All I could see was water in every direction. The lake was absolutely massive. Without any clear place to start our search, it would take forever.

Then again, Pittah had mentioned that Gin was a curious sort. “Perhaps we should be looking for a place that might have drawn Gin’s attention.”

Chiyome gave me a questioning stare. “Where would that be? There’s

nothing but water out here.”

Ariane nodded in agreement.

“Someplace no one’s ever been before,” I said, trying to make them understand. “A place that inspires the imagination. A place that Gin felt compelled to visit.”

I slowly started to change our course.

Ariane shot me a suspicious glance. “Wait, are you heading to the Furyu Mountains?”

“The Furyu mountain range is home to a wide variety of creatures,” Chiyome said. “Anyone living out here must know that it’s dangerous to travel there without making the proper preparations.”

“The more you tell someone young that a place is dangerous, the more they want to go.”

I gave the oars another powerful push, sending the boat coasting forward.

Ariane and Chiyome exchanged confused glances before shrugging with defeated sighs. They were both relatively young. Did they not understand the desire for adventure?

That left Ponta as my only potential ally, but the cottontailed fox seemed too content standing at the bow of the boat and letting its tail flutter in the sea spray to be concerned with such matters. It didn’t look like I’d be getting backup any time soon. I’d just have to keep the spirit of adventure alive myself and focus on looking for Gin.

To be honest, I was actually a little excited—in spite of the unfortunate circumstances that had brought us on this journey—but I decided to keep that from my companions.

I continued my pattern of rowing and course-correcting as we sped across the water.

While the Furyu Mountains were certainly known for being imposing and dangerous, the three of us—four, if you counted our furry companion—were capable of facing even a Dragon Lord, and I doubted we’d encounter anything

that powerful.

Just how long had I been rowing anyway?

I felt like we'd made some progress at the very beginning, but lately it didn't feel like we were getting any closer.

"The mountains are absolutely huge." Ariane looked as if she were staring at a towering wall of stone. "They look completely different from the side I'm used to seeing."

The Great Canada Forest, and Ariane's home, sat just on the other side of this very range. It made sense that the mountains would look significantly different out here with an unobstructed view, as opposed to the glimpses she was used to seeing through the trees.

The peaks were capped with snow, which spoke to their immense height. Adding in the types of wild creatures inhabiting the mountains, it would be no small feat for one of the mountain people, much less a human, to traverse them.

As we continued toward the mountain, I identified a far more pressing problem. There was no place to make landfall. Where the mountains met the lake were hundred-foot-high cliffs.

Obviously I could use Dimension Step to teleport to the top, but it would have been an incredible challenge for Gin and the other wolf people to scale the cliff.

"Hmm. I figured Gin and the crew came to explore the base of the mountains, but there's no way they would have abandoned their boat to climb up."

Chiyome seemed to be of the same mind. "Even I wouldn't attempt it without proper equipment."

If the climb presented a challenge to an agile ninja like Chiyome, then it would only be worse for Gin and the others.

"Kyii! Kyii!"

Ponta, however, seemed confident that it could make the trip.

"Maybe we should follow the coastline for a bit and see what we find." I changed course and began to row parallel to the cliff.

“It seems to continue like this as far as I can tell. I don’t see anywhere to climb up.”

While Ariane was talking, I suddenly felt the bow of the boat shift.

“Huh?”

At the same moment, the oars began to tremble in my hands.

Chiyome was the first to react. “Arc, look over there!”

“Kyii!”

I turned to see a massive cavern in the cliffside. I swallowed hard. “Is that a... cave? It’s huge...”

The four of us stared at the gaping maw of the cave in stunned silence. The opening was so large that even the massive Dragon Lord, Villiers Fim, could have made it through without touching the sides.

We hadn’t seen it earlier, due to the angle of our course.

Chiyome stared into the gloomy darkness ahead. “It looks like the lake continues on into the cavern.”

She was right. We could continue rowing right on through and inside. Not only that, but I could feel a gentle current running past the oars, slowly drawing our boat into the cave. Perhaps the lake split off and became a river. Judging by the size of the cave, it’d have to be a pretty big underground river.

Compared to the last mountain cave we’d passed through, while searching for the shrine, this was quite a bit larger.

Ariane looked back at me. “What should we do, Arc?” But it was clear from the look on her face that she already knew my answer.

I responded without hesitation. “I think we should go in, of course!”

Ponta wagged its tail from the ship’s bow in what I took to be agreement. “Kyii! Kyii!”

Ariane sighed and rolled her shoulders.

“I figured as much. But we’ll at least need some light, won’t we?” She offered one last bit of resistance, implying that we should head back to regroup.

I pulled a crystal lamp out of my bag. “No worries! I figured something like this might happen, so I brought all the supplies we’d need for an adventure.”

“Kyiii!”

Ariane didn’t seem to share my excitement. “Why would you bring something like that with you?”

Chiyome tried to smooth things over. “Is it so bad? Thanks to Arc, we don’t need to waste any time getting ready. Besides, a cave is a pretty likely place for people to go missing. We can’t just ignore it.”

“I guess so...” Ariane relented.

“All right, then. You’ll be in charge of lighting the way.”

I handed my crystal lamp to Ariane and went back to rowing.

The current continued to pull us deeper and deeper into the cave, though it was hardly strong enough that we couldn’t row back out if we wanted to. If it were much stronger, then I might have understood why Gin and the rest had gotten lost. But that didn’t seem to be the case.

Our meager light barely illuminated the cavernous space. As we drifted further inside, it felt as if we were floating in a great void. Light still shone from the entrance behind us, but it was difficult to get a feel for our surroundings.

“It’s impossible to know where we are, much less keep our bearings, with so little light.”

And yet we continued, undeterred, further and further from the fading light at the entrance. I rowed on into the darkness, fully accepting the risk that we might be shipwrecked...or worse. Knowing me, that wasn’t just possible, but likely.

Finally, I decided it would be best to find the wall. Not only to give the lamp something to reflect off of, but also for us to follow.

Chiyome seemed to have hit on the same idea. “Hey, Arc, you should head toward one of the walls so we can maintain our bearings.”

“Roger.”

I paddled over toward the side, though I was mindful not to get *too* close, in case the water near the walls was shallow.

I began to worry that the cave might fork somewhere up ahead. Then it would become quite difficult to track down Gin and his companions. What if they'd followed the other wall, for example, or gone in a completely different direction? And all of that was assuming that they'd even come to this cave in the first place.

"I just hope we can pick up their trail."

The sounds of my splashing oars reverberated throughout the silent cavern. All I could see was Ariane and the dull glow of the crystal lamp in her outstretched arm reflecting off the rugged stone walls. Everything else was pitch-black.

I felt as if I was losing all sense of time and distance. Just as I started to wonder how long we'd been at this, I spotted a flickering light up ahead.

"Wow! There are natural light crystals growing out here too?"

I glanced around and spotted more flickering specks.

Light crystals were used by the elves in various magical implements, such as the lamp Ariane held.

The specks of light reminded me of gazing up at the night sky...and also brought to mind the last time we were stuck in an underground cave.

Chiyome broke the silence. "At least they give us a sense of the layout of the cave."

Ponta, suddenly seeming to notice something, mewed from the boat's bow. It was sniffing excitedly.

"Kyii!"

"What is it?" Ariane reached out and stroked Ponta's head.

Up ahead, I caught sight of an expansive shoreline. The faint glow of the lamp reflected off tiny pebbles and the rapidly rising ground beneath us.

Once we drew close enough to the shore, Ponta dove off the bow and onto

the land.

“Kyii... Kyii!”

Ponta sniffed around for a moment before dashing off and stopping at another spot, where it began to mew excitedly and wag its tail.

“Arc!”

“Right.” At Ariane’s prompting, I brought the boat to the shore.

Chiyome was first out of the boat, followed shortly by Ariane. They took off in a jog toward Ponta. I followed more slowly, dragging the boat up onto the shore behind me. Sure, we could just teleport out of here if it got washed away, but I’d feel terrible if we lost one of the mountain people’s few possessions.

While I was struggling with the boat, I heard Ariane call out. “Arc, take a look at this!”

“Did you find something?” I asked, trudging over.

Ponta sat at her feet, waving its tail proudly. Following Ariane’s gaze, I saw the remains of a fire.

Chiyome picked up a piece of charred wood, crushed it between her fingers, and sniffed. “It’s still fresh.”

Ariane held the lamp high and inspected our surroundings.

A wall glowing with light crystals ran parallel to the shore a short distance away. Several smaller tunnels headed off in different directions, but there were no additional signs of life.

“It doesn’t seem like there’s anyone living out here, which means this must be Gin’s work.”

Chiyome pointed. “Look over there. Several footprints, leading away from us.”

Ariane let out a gasp. “Wow, you’re right!”

But no matter how hard I looked, I couldn’t see anything that resembled footprints. Only after kneeling down and closely inspecting the ground could I make out what they’d found. Once again, I was impressed by their abilities.

I mean, sure, hunters and military specialists knew all sorts of tracking

techniques, but it was all so far beyond my own ability that it was practically magic.

“Apparently, Ponta here is quite the tracker.”

I rubbed the fox’s head affectionately, eliciting a cheerful wag of its tail as it puffed its chest out.

“Kyii! Kyii!”

I was truly impressed at how Ponta had been able to catch the scent of the fire and bring us out here. There was no way that a wild creature could have created a fire like this. It had to have been built by Gin and his companions to cook their food—food that drew Ponta’s attention.

Regardless, I was glad to have finally found their trail.

“I’m guessing Gin used this spot as a place to rest. Maybe we should return to the village and let them know?”

Ariane nodded. “I agree. We’ve been here so long that I’ve completely lost track of time. Besides, we can just teleport back. Once we brief Pittah, he can make the call about what to do next.”

“All right. You two wait here, and I’ll head back.”

I took a few steps away from Ariane and cast Transport Gate. I returned half an hour later.

As soon as the light from my spell faded, I heard Ariane’s voice. “Well, you certainly took your time. What happened?”

I held up the bag in my hand in response.

Ariane’s eyes went wide. “That’s not my camping gear, is it?”

“As I gave my report to Pittah and Rowze, I realized it was already quite late. Since we won’t be able to continue our search until tomorrow, I figured we might as well camp out here. I stopped by Lalatoya, and Glenys got your camping gear together for me.”

Ariane furrowed her brow. “I don’t have any problem with continuing our search, but camping makes no sense. You could just teleport us back to the

village for the night.”

She was absolutely right. And we’d certainly get a far better night’s sleep in Lalatoya than we would out here.

But there was a method to my madness.

“If whoever lit this fire comes back here, wouldn’t it be better if we’re here? That is...assuming they didn’t get lost in the caves.”

Ariane let out an exaggerated sigh. “I... I guess I see your point.”

That was only my stated reason for doing this, of course. In reality, I wanted to enjoy the sense of adventure I’d get from camping on the shore of an underground lake. Ariane, on the other hand, had camped countless times during her days patrolling the great forests. She had little love for the experience, so I understood why she wasn’t so keen on the idea.

Ariane’s golden gaze stayed locked on me. “You didn’t orchestrate all of this just because you wanted to camp out here...right?”

She saw right through me, but I shook my head firmly anyway. “No, no, of course not! This is all so we can help the missing mountain people. Obviously I didn’t suggest this just because of the sheer thrill of adventure that would come with camping on the shore of an underground lake. Chiyome, what do you think?”

I tried to redirect the conversation. Chiyome, who was scouting the area, looked over at me and nodded.

“Arc’s right. It’s likely they’ll retrace their steps when it’s time to rest. Besides, I wanted to take a look around and see how safe this place is.”

As was the case any time you camped in unknown lands in this world, it was pretty much a given that someone would need to stand watch. Monsters roamed the wilds, and we had no idea what dangers lurked in this cave.

Though Chiyome had readily agreed to my plan, it was clear she had her own reasons for wanting to camp. The Jinshin clan not only traveled the lands to save their enslaved comrades; they also ensured the survival of their people by diligently bringing back any information they acquired.

As one of the Jinshin clan's six great warriors, it made sense that Chiyome would fall into her information gathering habits.

I wondered how many times I'd benefitted from the information network she and her fellow Jinshin clan members had built up over the years.

"Kyii!"

Ponta's cheerful mew reverberated off the cave walls and brought me back to reality. I coughed into my fist, glancing over toward Ariane.

"Chiyome and I should be able to keep watch just fine, so why don't I take you back to the village, or to your home in Lalatoya? We can all meet up again tomorrow morning."

Were it a contest between sleeping out in the open or in a nice, warm bed, there was no question which of the two would offer a more peaceful repose. And since there was no need for all three of us to spend the night out here, I figured at least one of us should be fully rested for tomorrow's search.

However, the angry look on Ariane's face said otherwise. "Now, wait just a second. Why would you only send *me* back? I can't just leave Chiyome out here alone, ya know. I'm definitely staying. Besides, I'm used to camping out."

She yanked the bag away from me and pulled it open. "Why'd you bring so much food? We're roughing it, aren't we?"

She sounded genuinely perplexed by the fact that the bag was filled to the brim with fresh meat, produce, and bread.

"I mean, I figured it'd be kinda chilly out here, so we might as well make something to warm ourselves up. I'll be cooking, so all you need to do is sit back and relax."

I pulled out a pot I'd brought and showed it to her, which resulted in an unimpressed sigh. I decided to leave her to her own devices and began getting dinner ready. Tonight, I'd be making a simple soup.

Chiyome volunteered to get some tinder together for the fire while I went about chopping vegetables and tomatoes into large chunks and cutting the meat into bite-sized pieces. I then poured some oil into the pot and tossed the

meat in to give it a nice sear.

The sound of the sizzling meat and the delicious scent wafting up from the pan seemed oddly out of place in the cave, which was eerily silent save for the lap of water against the shore.

Once the meat was nicely browned, I threw in some herbs and spices along with the chunked-up vegetables and sauteed them together before pouring in some water and putting the lid on to let it simmer.

“You really are pretty good at cooking, you know.”

Ariane’s voice drifted over as I watched the flame. I turned to find her staring at me with interest. We held each other’s gaze for a moment, until I realized that I hadn’t seen Chiyome for a while.

I glanced around. “Do you know where Chiyome went?”

“She said she was going to explore deeper into the cave.”

I recalled Chiyome’s earlier comment. “Hunh. She *did* say she wanted to take a look around.”

I turned my attention back to the pot. The rolling sound of bubbles breaking on the surface of the soup echoed loudly throughout the cavern.

“If the village construction keeps up the pace,” Ariane said, after a moment, “maybe Chiyome will be able to come here and take a load off.”

“Hmm?”

I shot Ariane a confused look.

“I mean, now that the whole Hilk debacle is over, we’ll be done traveling together soon. I dunno. It all seems kind of sad.” She let out a somber sigh.

Once the settlement was built, the Jinshin clan would undoubtedly move their base of operations here to continue serving as protectors of the mountain people.

With the massive Fuyu Mountains separating Ariane’s elven home from this new settlement, it would soon be no easy task for her and Chiyome to spend time together without teleportation powers like mine. The thought seemed to

weigh heavily on her.

I, too, would be busy—getting my shrine back into shape—and would likely also be seeing far less of Ariane for the first time since...well, pretty much since I'd come to this world in the first place.

Plus, Ariane was a soldier and had a duty to her people.

"I doubt we'll be able to find all the cardinals any time soon, so I imagine we still have some time together."

Ariane and I had gone practically everywhere together for so long that it felt natural, expected even. Sadness washed over me as we discussed the inevitable future.

"Kyii!"

Ponta's shrill cry cut through the moody atmosphere and brought my attention back to the bubbling pot. It must have detected a change in the scent and was prompting me to remove the lid.

A cloud of steam billowed up, smelling delightfully of tomatoey soup. It looked pretty good, I'd say.

"It won't do us any good to worry about things that haven't happened yet. Besides, I can teleport us all together whenever we want."

Ariane didn't look convinced. In fact, she only seemed even more annoyed. "Well, isn't that just swell, Arc? I sure wish I could teleport. Don't you want to try to teach me how? I'd find a way to show my appreciation." Her eyes took on a hopeful sparkle.

"Hmm... I'd be more than willing to, but I don't know if it's something I can teach."

For me, using magic was simply a matter of deciding to cast a spell. Then it just...happened. I couldn't think of a way to explain that process.

"I mean, I kind of gather up my magical energy and commit myself to teleporting and then, well, it's like...opening up a door, I guess?"

I looked at Ariane to see if this made any sense to her, but she'd slumped visibly, looking defeated.

“You, my sister...everyone around me seems to be able to do things on intuition alone. But that doesn’t work for me.”

While Ariane lamented over her lot in life, I caught sight of Chiyome approaching from a cave in the distance.

“Oh, Chiyome. We’re about to eat dinner.”

Chiyome found a place to sit near Ariane, who plopped down and pulled her in close to complain about her conversation with me.

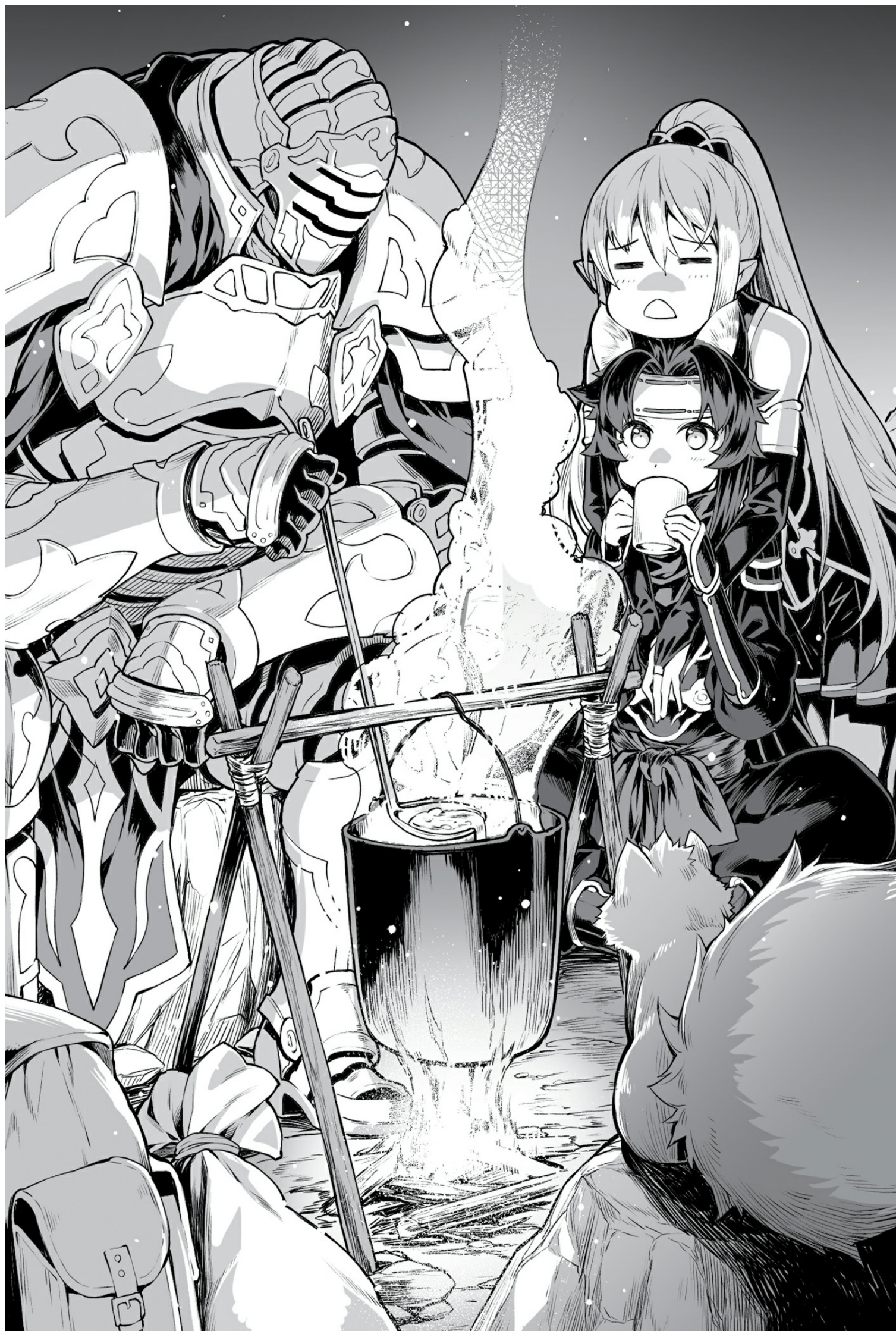
“Hey, listen! Arc said he’d teach me how to do magic...”

It felt like I was watching an easily annoyed older sister trying to pull her younger sibling into her problems.

Even if we *did* end up eventually finding different paths in life, nothing would ever take away the time we’d spent together. Maybe I didn’t need to feel sad after all.

“Kyii! Kyii!”

Ponta looked up at me pleadingly, urging me on as I dished out the soup, then dashing off to let Ariane know it was time to eat.



The next morning, we boarded our boat once again and let the current carry us downstream and deeper into the cave.

We'd slept in shifts the whole night, but we hadn't spotted a single monster.

I spoke to no one in particular as I slowly worked the oars. "I'm surprised at how quiet it was last night. Maybe there aren't any monsters down here."

Chiyome's ears twitched. She turned to look back at me from where she sat at the front of the boat.

"It's dangerous to make any judgments based on one night. But I didn't see any monsters or even tracks when I scouted the area. It's possible this place is pretty safe."

Ariane yawned, with Ponta held tightly to her chest. "Which means it's unlikely that Gin and whoever met an untimely end. Maybe they just got lost and couldn't find the exit." She stretched out her body to relieve some of the aches from sleeping on the ground.

"Hmm, I wonder. Thanks to the light crystals, there's ample illumination. I mean, sure, the cave's big. But big enough to get *that* lost?" Just as I said this, I noticed that the cave forked off in several directions up ahead.

Chiyome noticed the sudden split too and lifted the crystal lamp. "Looks like it branches off here. Which way do we go?" But before I had a chance to answer, she spoke again, pointing at something. "Can you move the boat over toward that large cave?"

"Certainly."

I rowed the boat in the direction she'd indicated.

Once we reached the split, Chiyome brought her face close to the wall, as if looking for something.

"This symbol was etched into the wall recently. They must've gone this way."

It looked like a blade had been used to carve several evenly spaced marks in the wall.

"Hunh... But if they're leaving markings, does that mean they plan on coming

back?”

“Look up ahead,” Ariane said. “The cave splits off yet again. It seems like the whole thing gets more elaborate the farther you go.”

While I puzzled over the right direction to take, Chiyome raised a hand and pointed.

“Head over there, to the largest entrance.”

“Mind if I ask your reasoning?”

“They went down the largest tunnel the first time the cave split off, so it seems likely they’d continue doing that to make it easier to find their way back. See? There’s another mark, just like last time.”

Ariane and I both turned, and, sure enough, there was the same marking. Choosing the largest tunnels made sense. It was probably the easiest way to retrace your steps and minimize the chance of getting lost.

“This should at least put us on the right path, even if we’re still a ways behind,” Ariane said.

Ponta mewed in agreement, wagging its tail. “Kyii!”

We continued along through several more passages before once again arriving in a vast, wide-open cavern. It was quite humid down here, but I could feel a gentle, dry breeze moving past me. My companions—all of them far more perceptive than I was—also took notice.

“Kyii! Kyii!”

Chiyome sniffed the air. “We’re close to the outside. I can smell it.”

Ariane closed her eyes, listening intently. “You’re right. I can hear the faint rustle of the wind.”

This encouraged me to row even harder.

I could no longer see any crystals, and we were once again forced to rely on the lamp as our only source of light. However, the farther we went, the stronger the sound of the wind grew. Up ahead, light from the outside world began to shine in.

“Looks like we found the exit!”

The ceiling of the cave dropped farther and farther down as we neared the source of the light, until finally I had to duck to avoid banging my head.

The lake—or river, or whatever—was just as wide as ever, but the hole was worlds apart from the one we’d entered on the other side.

I squinted as I rowed us out of the cave and into bright sunlight.

It looked as if we were in a long valley that had been scooped right out of a deep, impenetrable forest. The gentle current drew us along a winding path through the trees. The whole scene looked awfully familiar.

“Is this...the Great Canada Forest? Did we cross all the way through the Furyu Mountains?”

“No way! I never knew that there was a passage right through the mountains. But where are we? I guess we’ll just have to continue downstream to find out.” Ariane was just as surprised as I was. Probably even more so, considering this was her home.

From time to time, our surroundings darkened as a massive shadow fell over us from above. I figured it was probably one of the dragons that roosted up in the Furyu peaks.

With such dense foliage covering the valley, it was quite rare for these creatures to come down from the mountains, but out here in the open water, we made a fairly obvious target. Fortunately for us, our tiny boat bobbing down the river must have looked like unappealing prey, and we were left alone.

“I’m surprised we haven’t been attacked.” Ariane’s face was etched with concern, and she kept her eyes on the sky above.

I tried to offer some comfort. “You’ve nothing to worry about, Ariane. Even if we *are* attacked by a dragon, I’ll take it down in one fell swoop.”

She shot me a glance through narrowed eyes and let out an exasperated sigh. “Try to not use any over-the-top magic, all right? Even if you manage to take out one or two of them, it will only attract more. I’m in no mood for a battle of attrition with the likes of the Furyu dragons.”

The Furyu dragons were nowhere near as powerful as the Dragon Lords, but they were dragons all the same. Given that my fighting prowess revolved entirely around overpowering my enemies, I wasn't exactly good at battling quietly. Ariane or Chiyome would be better suited for that job.

For now, the best plan was to pray that we'd be able to pass through undisturbed.

We let the current carry us down the long, winding river, the Furyu Mountains growing ever smaller in the distance.

Chiyome spotted something up ahead and called out. "A boat!"

I looked in the direction she was facing and, sure enough, there was a canoe nearly identical to ours on the shore of the river. It looked like it had been abandoned.

These dugout canoes were each made from a single piece of wood with the interior removed, which gave them a lot more strength and durability than normal boats. However, the canoe up ahead was in absolutely miserable shape. There were splinters and chunks of wood everywhere.

A tense silence overcame us, and we began scanning the surrounding area.

"I don't see anyone..."

We'd been confident that Gin and the other lost members of his party were all still alive up until this point, but the sight of the smashed canoe cast a dark cloud of doubt over that certainty.

What could have happened to them?

It wasn't impossible that one of the Furyu dragons had destroyed their canoe, but I saw no signs of dragons in the area. Perhaps something else had done this.

We were now in the Great Canada Forest, after all. The mana here was dense—a perfect place for powerful monsters to gather.

Ariane and the other elves living out here were accustomed to this, which explained why she looked so attentive as she scanned the unfamiliar surroundings.

The elves lived in villages spread throughout the Great Canada Forest, though

the area was far too large for them to have a full grasp of what went on within its murky depths. In fact, according to Dillan, the Great Canada Forest was larger than the entire Rhoden Kingdom. As such, the elves who lived there were vastly outnumbered by the monsters that called the forest their home.

“I guess we should go check it out.”

“Kyii...” Ponta didn’t seem to be picking up on anything dangerous in the immediate area, so I decided to row our boat over to the shore. As we got close, I felt the bottom of the canoe scrape against the riverbed. The sound echoed in the otherwise silent forest.

After Ariane, Chiyome, and Ponta were safely out of the boat, I took a rope and tied it to a nearby tree to keep it from floating away.

Sure, we’d still be able to get back using my teleportation magic even if the boat was destroyed, but given what had happened to the canoe left on the shore—and the fact that we were still only borrowing ours—I didn’t feel confident leaving it there.

“The current isn’t too strong, so the rope should be enough to hold it. Assuming no one cuts it, of course.”

While I was busy surveying my work, Ariane kept a careful watch on our surroundings. Chiyome knelt next to the shattered canoe and inspected its remains.

“Is there anything that hints at where Gin may have gone?”

Chiyome pointed at the dirt next to the boat. “There’s a blood trail. It looks pretty light, so the wound probably wasn’t life-threatening.”

I looked closer and saw that the earth was stained red in places. “Hunh. You’re right, that does look like a blood trail. So maybe they were able to escape from whatever attacked them?”

I glanced around uneasily.

The only sounds were those of the burbling water and the birds twittering away high up in the trees. It was so peaceful that it seemed almost unimaginable there could be monsters lurking out there.

“Hey, Ponta, can you tell which way the bleeding person went?”

Ponta was already sniffing at the ground with great interest. It tilted its head back to look up at me and mewed.

“Kyii? Kyii!”

Ponta gave a good long sniff and then started looking for the source of the scent. Chiyome stared intently at the ground surrounding the droplets of blood and started scouting the area, much like the cottontailed fox.

Obviously, no ninja worth her salt would want to lose to a furry animal in a tracking battle.

Suddenly, Chiyome and Ponta raised their heads at once and looked in the same direction.

“It seems like they ran off into the forest.”

“Kyii! Kyii!”

With both of them in agreement, I was convinced. The group must have been trying to escape whatever had attacked them.

“All right, then,” Ariane said, her hand falling to the hilt of her sword. “We’ll just need to keep an eye out for monsters as we move through the woods.”

“Right. We’ll be far better off if we spot them before they spot us.” I hefted my bag.

Chiyome and Ponta led the way into the forest. I followed after them, while Ariane brought up the rear. The two expert trackers moved forward with confidence, not stopping even once to confirm their direction.

After walking for some time, we found ourselves standing before an immense tree, much larger than the surrounding ones.

“The trail leads up the tree.”

I squinted up, searching for any signs of life. As I stood there staring, Ponta seemed to pick up on something and started mewling excitedly.

“Kyii! Kyii!”

A familiar gray-furred face peered over a large branch at us. It was a wolf man

with a pair of large triangular ears atop his head—Gin.

He seemed to recognize us as well and started waving his arms, beckoning us to come closer, then shouting down to us, his voice booming.

“Climb up here, quick! There’s a dangerous beast down there!”

No sooner were the words out of his mouth than the underbrush began to rustle angrily, as if attracted by the sound. The fur on Ponta’s tail puffed out as whatever it was drew closer.

“Kyii! Kyii!” Something about the way Ponta called made it sound like the cottontailed fox already knew what was on the other side.

Chiyome was the second to cry out. “Something’s coming!”

Ariane drew her sword and held it at the ready while I tossed my rucksack to the side, lifted my shield, and unsheathed my own sword. I scanned the tree line for movement.

An immense creature with a large, glowing shell emerged from the underbrush.

It stood about waist-high, but it was an impressive five meters in length with four massive legs on each side. The front two sported gigantic pincers that could easily have cut a person in two. A large stinger-tipped tail rose up into the air behind the creature, giving it the appearance of an oversized scorpion.

Ariane’s face darkened. “A morse seperis?! No way!”

The thing looked like it would be rather slow to maneuver, but it moved toward Ariane at alarming speed, using its pincers to cut down any trees or bushes in the way before lunging in for the kill.

Ariane dodged easily, letting the momentum carry her back, rather than coming in for a counterattack of her own.

The black scorpion recovered, repositioned itself, and dashed forward again.

Seeing an opening, Chiyome drew her dagger, but Ariane called out to stop her.

“Stay back! Blades can’t cut its carapace!”

“Hmph. Right!”

Chiyome flipped backward through the air and landed next to Ariane.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw some bushes shaking. I turned to see a second morse seperis crawl out into the open...its massive tail raised to strike me.

I heard a loud whoosh of air as the stinger shot toward me like a bullet. It was all I could do to heft my shield up in front of my face.

CLAAAAANG!

It felt like a hunk of metal slammed into my shield as the stinger made contact. The sound of the impact echoed through the forest as I flew backward, crashing into a tree trunk.

“Hnngwah!”

“Arc?!”

“Arc!”

“Kyii!”

Fortunately, the damage to my body was minimal. But the attack was a *lot* more powerful than I’d expected. It felt like I’d taken a cannonball head-on.

For once, I was grateful that Ponta hadn’t been riding on my helmet.

“N-no worries. I’m just a bit rattled is all.”

I shook my head a few times to try to get the world to stop spinning. Ariane and Chiyome looked relieved to see my quick recovery.

Turning my attention back to the second morse seperis, I noticed that the stinger at the tip of its tail was now missing.

So...it hadn’t just swung its tail at me. It was able to shoot its stinger out at an unbelievable speed. But for a scorpion to exhaust its only means of attack... Wouldn’t that leave it vulnerable to other monsters? As I pondered this, I witnessed something that nearly blew my mind. A new stinger slowly emerged from the hole in its tail.



Its rate of regeneration was unlike anything I'd ever seen.

"These monsters really are in a class of their own."

I didn't want to take more than one of those blows, so I lifted my Holy Thunder Sword of Caladbolg and teleported away.

"Dimensional Step!"

I used my short-distance teleportation spell to instantaneously close the distance between me and the giant scorpion, bringing my blade down on its head.

KA-KIIIIIIIN!

The sword bounced right off the hardened shell with a loud, metallic clang. The morse seperis took advantage of my disorientation and swung its pincers toward me.

"How hard is this stuff that it can just knock my sword back?!"

I dove away and scrambled to my feet, momentarily dumbfounded.

My sword was a mythical-class weapon—the top tier in the entire game—and was capable of damaging the scales of the Dragon Lords. And yet somehow it had bounced right off the morse seperis's shell.

"How about this?! Sword of Judgment!"

Hoping to get my next attack in before the scorpion could react, I lifted my sword high into the air and swung it down as I unleashed the Paladin skill.

A magical rune appeared beneath the morse seperis, and a sword of blue light shot straight up out of the ground. Though its shell could repel attacks from above, I figured its soft belly would be no match for a blow from below.

Unfortunately, it was just as Ariane had said. Even magical blades were of no use against this thing. This same attack that had so easily slain a giant basilisk was only able to knock the scorpion into the air, without leaving so much as a scratch.

Given that the elves made their home here in the Great Canada Forest, I figured they must have found *some* way to deal with this scorpion-like creature.

If not, Ariane would have given the order to run away.

It'd be a lot more productive to simply ask Ariane for some guidance than to continue flailing around in the dark like I was.

"How do you stop these things?!" I called out to Ariane as she faced off against the other morse seperis.

Her pointed ear twitched slightly in response as she easily dodged one of the scorpion's strikes. She flipped backward through the air, stabbing her sword into a tree trunk and hanging off of it. The image reminded me of a ninja dangling from a roof.

"You can't kill them head-on. You need to lead them into some kind of trap and then use a powerful fire spell to incinerate them."

"Got it. Good thing we can both use fire magic, huh?"

"Wait, you idiot! If you use a fire attack without first luring the morse seperis into a trap, you risk burning down the whole forest!"

"Hmm. Then what should we do?"

I understood that if I wanted to use any type of fire spells out here in the forest, I'd need to do so in an area surrounded by rocks or in a basin. This trap that Ariane was referring to would have to be some place that could be filled with fuel, like oil or dry leaves. But we didn't exactly have time to get all that stuff ready.

The morse seperis had fully regenerated its stinger and was raising its tail for another strike.

"Dimensional Step!"

I used my teleportation magic to move to the scorpion's side, watching as the large stinger slammed into the ground where I'd been standing moments earlier.

"Teleporting might be overkill, but hey, it works."

The morse seperis actually wasn't so dangerous once you understood its attack pattern, though I still risked having one of those shots miss me and hit Ariane or Chiyome. I decided it was best to lure the morse seperis away from

my companions to make sure that didn't happen.

I noticed they were both keeping trees behind them as they dodged to avoid this very thing. It spoke to their sheer talent on the field of battle.

Of course, we'd never win this fight just by dodging attacks.

I glance at Ariane again. "Well?"

She shook her head. "The shell on these things is too strong for normal attacks. Which means that we need to somehow destroy them from within."

Ariane turned to Chiyome. The young ninja nodded and immediately launched into a series of head-on attacks against the morse seperis. Obviously, none of her blows actually caused any damage, but they *did* distract the thing.

The morse seperis thrust its pincers toward Chiyome in rapid succession, though she dodged them with little effort. The sight of it almost seemed laughable.

While Chiyome dodged the monster's attacks with the grace of a ballerina, Ariane silently moved into its blind spot, her golden gaze focused intently on its long body.

The next moment, Chiyome bounded into the air to dodge another pincer strike right as Ariane swung down with a flash of silver toward a small gap in its armor.

I heard a loud squelching noise followed almost immediately by the morse seperis's right claw dropping to the ground with a thud. Ariane had severed it at the point where the limb connected to its body.

Whether out of anger or pain, I couldn't say, but the morse seperis started swinging its remaining pincer wildly, smashing everything within range.

Ariane had focused her attack on the point where one piece of shell overlapped with the next and had been able to strike the exposed muscle between the gaps. It was all so fast that I hadn't been able to get a good look, but I could tell that it was no normal sword strike.

The flesh beneath the scorpion's armor was obviously a far better target than its impenetrable shell, but this called for precision, which meant my usual

methods would be useless.

Once the morse seperis started to calm down, possibly out of exhaustion, Chiyome darted in again from the right side, where it could no longer easily defend.

She performed several gestures in the air, and a cone of water formed in her left hand. She launched it toward the creature's wound.

"Body to water, bloodstream hell spear!"

The morse seperis began to convulse as thin spears of water shot out of its skin from the gaps in its armor. A moment later, it slumped to the ground, motionless.

That was one monster down, but I had serious doubts about my ability to replicate the delicate dance they'd just performed, given my absolute lack of grace or finesse.

However, thinking back on what Ariane had said about needing to destroy it from the inside, I felt confident that there was at least *something* I could do. I'd just gotten overwhelmed earlier and hadn't thought things through.

"Heh. I'll find my own way to deal with this one."

I lifted my shield and slid my sword back into its sheath as I eyed my target.

"Dimensional Step!"

As soon as the scorpion returned my gaze, I teleported behind it and grabbed its immense tail.

"Hnng!"

With a bit of effort, I yanked the creature back and started to slowly spin it around until it lifted off the ground. I wondered if this was the first time in history that a knight had swung a scorpion by its tail.

Its body smashed through shrubs and rocks and anything that got in its way.

"We're doing this in one shot!"

I slammed the morse seperis into the trunk of a massive tree.

FWOOOOMF!

The dull thud resonated up through the tree. Leaves came showering down around me, and I felt a tingle run up my arms from the force of the blow.

The morse seperis immediately raised both of its pincers.

Apparently, I hadn't caused quite enough damage yet.

Grabbing it by the tail once more, I spun it around and slammed it into another tree.

"Take that!"

FWOOOOMF!

This time I could feel my teeth vibrate from the blow.

I looked at the morse seperis again, but it seemed to have survived just fine and was struggling to break free of the tree. However, it was moving a lot slower than it had been before. Evidently, these attacks were doing some kind of damage inside that shell.

With humans, it didn't matter how strong your armor was. A powerful-enough blow could still scramble your insides. The same held true for an oversized bug.

I belted out a triumphant laugh. "Here we go again!"

I was really getting into it now, and I swung the morse seperis into another nearby tree. Then another. And another.

After the tenth impact, I heard a cracking sound, and the entire tail tore loose. The morse seperis flew a short distance before crashing into the ground.

I tossed the tail aside and looked at the main body. The tailless creature was still breathing, though weakly.

I drew my sword and plunged it firmly in the morse seperis's stomach. It twitched once before slumping to the ground.

"Damn, that was exhausting." I allowed myself a moment to catch my breath.

"Kyii! Kyii!"

Ponta hopped down from its hiding place up in the trees and took up its usual perch atop my helmet. Ariane looked unimpressed as she walked over toward

me.

“Arc, you really need to think about your surroundings more. I mean, look at what you’ve done.”

She gazed at the surrounding trees and let out a dramatic sigh.

I had to admit that the damage was pretty extreme compared to the graceful combat she and Chiyome had engaged in earlier. It looked like a tornado had passed through the forest.

Pieces of rock littered the area, while the trees all sported various scars. Even the ground was bare from having the underbrush ripped up—a swath of destruction in a once-tranquil forest scene.

I wouldn’t admit it to her, of course, but I’d actually had a bit of fun. Although, if there were any environmentalists in this world, I was sure they’d be on their way to lodge a complaint with me right away.

I scratched the side of my head in embarrassment. “Sorry. I guess I got a little *too* into it.”

I yanked my sword out of the corpse, slid it back into my sheath, and joined Chiyome as she made her way over to Gin and the other lost mountain people.

“Th-thank you so much! You guys are really amazing!”

Gin bowed to each of us in turn before stopping to smile at me.

Ariane let out an annoyed sigh. “Well, it looks like we found everyone, so we should head back to the village. Is that wound on your shoulder okay?”

She gestured toward Gin. I noticed a red-stained piece of cloth wrapped around his shoulder. That must have been the source of the blood we’d found by the river.

He chuckled weakly. “Y-yeah. I probably won’t be able to use a weapon for a while, but given that this is all I’ve suffered after being attacked by those things, I count myself lucky.”

“Can I see it?”

I stepped forward and put my hand over his shoulder, then cast Heal. A gentle

glow appeared around his wound before fading away.

“How’s that? Does it still hurt?”

Gin was at a loss for words. He rotated his shoulder a few times before looking back at me with wide eyes.

“Th-thank you, Arc! It’s like I was never even injured in the first place!”

Gin’s companions seemed reassured at the sight.

A thought struck me. I turned my attention back to the trees I’d smashed in the battle and put my hand near one of them.

“Heal!”

Light poured from my hand and into the damaged tree trunk, spreading out and filling in the chipped and splintered wood. A few moments later, all of the battle scars were gone and the tree looked as healthy as ever.

“Hunh. So, healing magic works on trees too. I guess I can put the forest back to the way I found it, then!”

“Kyii! Kyii!” Ponta let out a cheerful cry from atop my helmet as I moved from tree to tree to undo the damage.

Ariane watched with a mixture of shock and amazement. “I’ve never seen anyone use curative magic on trees before...”

Chiyome nodded in agreement. “Me either, but I guess it makes sense that it would work.”

Considering that plants were a form of life, it made sense that curative magic should work on them, though apparently few people had actually tried it. Then again, given how few people in this world could use curative spells, it must have seemed crazy to waste such a talent on anything other than sentient life.

Maybe I should try my magic on a variety of things.

“Hmm. I think that’s about it.”

Once I was done fixing all of the damage I’d done, I turned back toward Ariane and my small audience. Gin was watching me with great fascination.

“So...why *did* you guys decide to come here without telling anyone in the

village what you were doing?” I asked. “Why didn’t you turn back?”

Ariane’s ears perked up. Apparently, she was interested in hearing the answer as well.

But Gin just stayed quiet, a gloomy look washing over his face.

Chiyome chimed in instead. “You were looking for a path from the village to the outside world, weren’t you?”

The three wolf people looked surprised at this and exchanged hurried glances. It seemed like she’d hit the nail on the head.

But that still left a very important question unanswered.

“Hunh.” Ariane looked just as suspicious as I felt. “Does that mean you wanted to get away from the village? Did you have some problem with the new settlement?”

“No, no,” Gin said, while the others vigorously shook their heads. “It’s nothing like that! Thanks to everyone’s hard work, we’re finally able to live in peace without fear of persecution from the humans!”

“So...?” I prompted.

Gin only looked up at the sky. After a few moments, his shoulders slumped. “I know we need to grow the settlement, but I can’t help but feel that as the population increases, it’ll become cramped again, like in Calcut.”

I remembered the hidden village nestled within the Calcut Mountains back in the Rhoden Kingdom. It was incredibly small. The whole reason for building this new settlement was because Calcut had become overpopulated after the influx of formerly enslaved mountain people. The village had already been cramped due the rugged landscape, and there was simply no space to accommodate a bunch of newcomers.

The settlement under construction, however, was located on a vast, unexplored plain with no such limitations. It would be a long time before the population ever reached such density.

When I reminded Gin about this, he shook his head.

“I’m not talking about space. I mean that I don’t think this will ever become a

place where we can actually relax and not have to worry about the humans tracking us down. If they find a way to cross the mountains, we'll have no choice but to run again."

Ariane and I exchanged a confused glance. I understood what he was saying, but I had no idea what that had to do with finding a path to the outside world.

"Right now," Gin continued, "I think living on the run is unavoidable. I've heard stories that the humans, elves, and mountain people have recently entered into a treaty, but I don't think I'm alone in noticing that no one is breathing any easier."

I finally understood completely.

Even though the three parties had signed a treaty that should guarantee their respective rights, it meant little to the people who'd lived under a different system up until now.

It would still be some time before the humans stopped calling the mountain people "beasts," let alone before the mountain people learned to trust humans.

What's more, the treaty didn't even encompass *all* humans. There were still the two dueling empires up north insisting that humans were the superior species. The mountain people's safety couldn't be assured until these countries were also on board.

"That's why we need to continue growing the settlement until we're strong enough to fight back against the humans. If we can find a route to the outside world, to the elves, then we can exchange goods and information. We just happened to stumble across the cave while we were fishing."

It all came together for me. Even if they did manage to find a place to escape from the humans, there was no assurance that this safety would last. As technological innovations increased, so would the humans' territory. What would happen when the humans and mountain people crossed paths again?

"I understand that it's far from ideal to be locked up in a large valley. Even if you're out of sight of the outside world, that doesn't mean the outside world doesn't exist. As you say, it's best to prepare yourselves for the worst."

Gin and the others nodded eagerly at my assessment.

Here I'd thought that their sense of adventure had gotten the best of them, but in reality, they were worried about the future of the village and were trying to plan accordingly.

These people had lived through harsh times while simply trying to exist. It wouldn't have been like them to go off on a little jaunt for curiosity's sake. I felt guilty that I was lucky enough to go off on adventures whenever I pleased.

On the other hand, I *had* put in a fair bit of work toppling the Holy Hilk Kingdom. And I'd built up my power so that I could help more people. Didn't that mean I was allowed to have a little fun now and then?

Ariane put a hand to her chin. "I see. Even with the treaty signed, it would still expand your choices immensely if you were to have some sort of physical route between your village and the Great Canada Forest. Given how much land you have available, you'll almost certainly be able to build a country of your own, and it couldn't hurt to have the elves as neighbors."

Gin brightened at this. Ariane seemed to understand where he was coming from.

However, Chiyome quickly put a damper on things. "Be that as it may, it was a horrible idea for you to go off on your own without talking to Pittah and the others. You're going to have to be punished."

The three wolf people went visibly pale.

I decided to change the subject. "Before we head back, is there anything from these scorpion things we can use, Ariane?" I lifted the morse seperis tail.

"I've been told to bring back the shell whenever we kill one of these things, so they must be useful for something."

"All right, then. We'll bring them back with us. Can Gin and the others give the one I killed to the village?"

Since the morse seperis lived in the Great Canada Forest, I felt like I should ask Ariane, in case they claimed some sort of ownership over these creatures.

But she didn't really seem to care. "I don't see why not. You killed it, after all. Chiyome and I killed the other one, so why don't we just give that to the village

too?”

The wolf people let out a collective gasp. “Not only did you save us, but you’re also giving us these gifts? I don’t believe it!”

“Even if I kept the thing, I wouldn’t know what to do with it. Anyway, we’d best report back to the village. I’m sure Pittah will have more than a few words for you. We can talk about all this after that’s done with.”

I dragged the morse seperis carcass with me as we headed back toward the boats, imagining Pittah’s reaction and thinking about how to minimize the punishment coming to the wolf people.

Chapter 3:

Trouble Brewing

THE OLD MAN rested his hand against the moss-covered stone wall of the shrine and slowly lowered his gaze. He had a flowing, white beard and long ears growing out of the top of his head. Beneath his bushy brows, a pair of intense eyes regarded me sternly. The man's diminutive frame and round, puffy tail marked him as one of the rabbit people, the same as Pittah.

This was one of the craftspeople who'd come with me from the settlement.

"I heard it was a shrine, but this is a lot bigger than I imagined."

He was in the middle of estimating just how much lumber he'd need to put a roof on the shrine, mumbling to himself as he walked the perimeter.

True to his word, Pittah had sent two craftspeople here as payment for finding Gin. He'd also sent the wolf man and his companions along to work as laborers.

The three of them had received a brutal dressing-down from both Pittah and Rowze before being assigned my construction work as punishment.

I'd tried to reduce their sentence by explaining why they'd traveled through the cave in the first place, but I don't know if it made any difference.

Currently, Gin was working with the other craftspeople to build a temporary cabin they could live in while they worked on the shrine—just a simple building that would provide them with a place to sleep. It was probably also good practice for the wolf people.

The shrine itself was made of sturdy stone walls, but the lack of a roof made it unsuitable for sleeping.

I didn't really see the need to stay here while we waited on materials, but apparently there was a lot of prep work that needed to be done.

I decided to let them make the call. Leave it to the experts, as they say.

“Assuming you want to build the roof like we previously discussed, this is the amount of wood we should need.” The rabbit man handed me a piece of wood with some numbers scratched on it. “Are you sure you don’t want us to provide it?”

“Of course. You guys still need a lot of wood for the village. Besides, you’re already offering your services. I couldn’t take any more from you. I have more than enough money to buy the wood we need. Not to mention the connections. If you need anything at all, just let me know, okay?”

The old man offered a faint smile beneath his heavy beard and bowed his head in thanks. “Greatly appreciated. To be honest, we’re still running far short of the amount of wood we’ll need to build the village. But I can send these men if you need someone to lug supplies around for you.”

I shook my head. “I appreciate it, but my contact lives in a human town. We may have signed a treaty, but it would still cause a disturbance. Plus I previously borrowed a cart to transport a grand dragon into town, so that won’t be an issue.”

The old man chuckled. “I see, I see. In that case, I’ll just keep having them do the dirty work.”

With that, he turned to check on the wolf people.

They’d said it would take just a few days to build the roof, but we decided to send them back to their village while waiting on the lumber. Construction workers were in short supply back at the settlement, so I’d need to get the lumber together as quickly as possible.

My plan was to head for a port town located in the Rhoden Kingdom.

Truth be told, it was only by sheer coincidence that I’d first become acquainted with the merchant I had in mind, but he’d grown to become a reliable source for me to sell monster parts and to acquire the supplies needed for the new settlement.

Though he was technically quite a long way from where I usually roamed, my teleportation magic took care of that problem. I felt quite lucky to have managed to become acquainted with a merchant I could rely on like this. They

weren't exactly a dime a dozen.

As I was reminiscing about how our chance encounter had unfolded, I heard a familiar voice call out to me from behind.

"Hey, Arc! Are you done with that thing you guys were talking about? We need to tell Father what'd happened!"

I spotted Ariane. Her amethyst skin was damp, and she was drying her long hair with a towel. Apparently, she'd taken a dip while I spoke with the craftspeople. Both she and Chiyome were quite taken by the shrine's natural hot spring and would soak whenever we returned here.

This time, Chiyome had chosen to stay at the village, so it was just Ariane today.

"Well, we just finished estimating how much lumber we'll need. I was thinking about heading to Fehrbio Alsus to give my report to Dillan before making my way to Lahki's Shoppe in Lamburt. What are your plans?"

The report she was referring to, of course, was about the underground route through the Furyu Mountains. Even if the mountain people weren't considered enemies, Ariane thought it best that the elven leaders know there was a way for people to pass through what they thought of as an impenetrable wall.

Putting aside the report to Dillan, going out to visit Lahki was an entirely personal matter, so I didn't assume Ariane would want to come. However, judging by the way her brow furrowed when I asked her if she was interested, she'd taken the question personally.

"Obviously I'm interested! I'm not going to stay behind while you and Chiyome go off to Lamburt alone!"

I cocked my head to the side. "Why would Chiyome be going to Lamburt?"

She looked incredulous. "You're going to use the cart you left at the village to go to the merchant, right? You still don't know how to drive! You'll need to ask her to help you. Seriously, I can't believe you sometimes." She let out a loud sigh, slumping her shoulders in a dramatic fashion.

I'd managed to work out how to ride a horse reasonably well, but driving a

cart—much less a four-horse cart like this one—was completely beyond me.

I'd originally planned on leading the horses along and walking with them, but the more I thought about it, the more I realized how much I'd stand out if I did that. Walking with a horse-drawn cart would be like loading up a truck and then trying to pull it along. The idea was ludicrous.

Besides, I'd recently revealed to Lahki, the merchant I was visiting, that I was an elf. If I came into town doing something strange, that could drastically alter the townspeople's view of all elves. Now that I was officially a member of Lalatoya, that wouldn't do. It would be far better if they thought I was a lout who didn't know how to drive a cart.

That meant I'd need Chiyome.

"You're right. When I stop by the settlement to pick up the cart, I'll see if she's willing to help."

Ariane sighed again. "Don't you think Chiyome realized all of this when you told her you wanted to borrow the cart? She's probably waiting for you right now."

"You really think she read that much into it?"

Ariane rolled her eyes. "Just because you're bad at picking up on things doesn't mean she is."

This comment only confused me even more. I always tried to be attentive, but maybe I was falling short?

I mean, okay, I tended to forget things from time to time. But who didn't?

"C'mon, hurry up!" Ariane urged. "We don't want to keep Chiyome waiting all day!"

I nodded. "Hey, Ponta! Time to go, buddy!"

As if summoned by my voice, a familiar splotch of green fur appeared in the clear blue sky and coasted toward me, landing expertly in its rightful place atop my helmet. A moment later, I felt its large fluffy tail wagging.

"Kyii! Kyii!"

Every time we returned to the shrine, Ponta always went off to spend time with my driftpus, Shiden. Despite the massive size difference between the two creatures, they seemed to get along great. In fact, I'd sometimes stumble across Ponta curled up in Shiden's mane as they slept together. There was something heartwarming about seeing two very different creatures living together in harmony. It gave me hope for the sentient species of this world.

"All right, let's get to work." Ariane crossed her arms.

After making sure she was close and that Ponta was safe atop my head, I cast Transport Gate to teleport us to the capital of the Holy Hilk Kingdom.

Everything went dark, and I felt weightless for an instant before I found myself out of the serene forest and in the midst of the bustling refugee camp.

Off in the distance, I could see the ruins of Fehrbio Alsus, the once-great capital of the Holy Hilk Kingdom, where half of its residents had lost their lives at the hands of their own ruler.

The sheer number of refugees in the camp had exploded wildly since the last time we'd been here.

"These people are going to lose their minds if we don't figure out what to do with them soon."

Glancing into the various mismatched tents lining the camp, I saw that the refugees were mostly just sitting around, looking burned out and lost.

Up until just a few days ago, they'd been living calm, peaceful lives in their homes. Then the living embodiment of death had uprooted all of that for no discernable reason. Many of them were still coming to terms with this.

I looked for the sisters we'd saved the other day, but there were just too many people.

"Try to focus, Arc. Let's get going."

At Ariane's prompting, I turned toward the large tent at the center of the camp and began walking.

Once inside, I found humans, elves, and mountain people all bustling about. A man called out as soon as we entered.

“Oh, what brings you two here?”

Dillan had been put in charge of running this refugee camp. Though he wore a gentle smile, the exhaustion was plain on his face.

“I apologize for taking up your time. I’ve already told Glenys, since she’s serving as your substitute in Lalatoya, but I thought it best to let you know about this new development.”

He gave me a curious look and gestured for the others to leave the tent and give us some privacy. Then he dropped down into a chair, crossed his arms, and looked up at me.

“Well, from your tone of voice, it doesn’t seem to be bad news. What is it?”

Ariane informed him of the events that had unfolded back at the settlement, and the cave route we’d uncovered. Dillan listened in silence, watching me with great interest. Once she was done speaking, he sat looking off into space.

“I left my detailed maps at home, but considering the location of the new settlement and the size of the river you described, I’d say that sounds like the Librout, or maybe the tributary it branches off from, which runs past Lalatoya.”

Librout... The name sounded familiar. I remembered walking along a river up from the Rhoden Kingdom toward Lalatoya. It had split somewhere deep in the forest. Following one of those branches had led me to the village.

“If I recall correctly, the Librout River in the Rhoden Kingdom is formed where two rivers converge upstream, one of which is the Lydel. Is that right?”

The old man nodded. “Yes, that’s right. I can’t say whether the Librout is connected to this cave or not without actually conducting an investigation, but if it is, that would mean that you could take a boat down the Librout all the way from Lalatoya and Dartu in Canada to Diento and even Rhoden’s capital of Olav.”

Ariane eyes widened. “That would be amazing! Think about how easy it would be to travel between all these places.”

Since the elves had invented magical ships that didn’t require the use of a sail, they were able to move upstream with relative ease.

Moreover, the current from the river that traversed the mountains wasn't very strong at all, so even the mountain people should be able to do it with oars and brute strength alone. However, given the dragons that lurked near the mouth of the Furyu Mountains, a certain degree of speed—as provided by the magical ships—would be preferable.

But there was still one issue. Before I even had a chance to voice my concerns, Dillan spoke up. It was almost as if he read my mind.

“On the other side of the coin, this bout of good fortune is not without potential danger. I'll speak with the high elders and have Fangas put together a party to investigate the matter further. For now, it would be best to say nothing of this to the humans.”

The human kingdoms of Rhoden and Nohzan had been brought together here to sign a treaty guaranteeing the safety of the very same mountain people who lived behind the Furyu Mountains. But it would be some time yet before the two groups could actually trust each other. Even with the elven lands of the Great Canada Forest in between, it seemed unwise to let such important information out just yet.

Ariane appeared to be of the same mind. “So we should probably also avoid using this route for the time being?”

Dillan shook his head. “Not exactly. I'm much more concerned about the knowledge of it getting out. After we've scouted the route and confirmed that it can be used safely, I see no problem with sending aid to the mountain people as a prelude to opening up trade. If we can cross through the mountains using boats, it will not only make it much easier to transport people and goods, but it will also allow us to join forces in times of need. This is quite a fortuitous discovery.”

I could imagine how excited Gin and the others would be if they could see how happy Dillan was about their discovery, especially considering all the trouble they'd gotten into. If the elves were willing to offer them some support, I could see the settlement growing to massive proportions in a matter of years.

“I'm sure they'll be overjoyed.”

“We can talk specifics later. Once we get a scouting party together, I'm sure

I'll need your assistance, Arc. What do you say?"

It was clear that Dillan didn't want us to say anything to the mountain people yet. But I had no issue with this, since it would ultimately aid in the village's development. I answered both of his requests, spoken and unspoken, without hesitation.

"I'm more than happy to do whatever I can."

The elven leader chuckled. "I knew we could count on you. We've discussed this already, but I'd also like to ask for your help in transporting all of the refugees to their new homes, once the Nohzan and Rhoden kingdoms reach an agreement about what to do with them."

"Understood."

I still had no idea exactly how many people even *wanted* to move elsewhere, but without any sort of power structure in place, it seemed unlikely that they could continue to live in this shell of a city.

Moving out into the farmlands that surrounded the capital was a possibility, but Dillan was concerned that the area would fall into lawlessness now that the pontiff was no longer in power.

After years of being exposed to the church's teachings, there were still many people who simply couldn't accept aid from the elves or so-called beast people and refused to enter the camp.

They were victims of the pontiff's abuse all the same, though, and we fully intended to help them. Indeed, I felt that it was my duty to do so.

I couldn't really explain it, but I felt like I could see a part of myself in the Hilk leader. If things had just gone a little differently when I'd arrived here... Well, let's just say I could see a lot of similarities and leave it at that. Perhaps trying to help the refugees was just my way of trying to prove how different we were.

A figure entered the tent, interrupting my thoughts. "Well, it looks like we're just about done." It was a hulking dark elf wearing a gigantic war hammer on his back and sporting an intimidating scar that ran down his face.

Ariane spoke up immediately. "Oh, Grandfather. Are you back from hunting

the undead?”

The old man grinned broadly. “Ariane!”

Though he struck a rather intimidating figure, Fangas Flan Maple, one of the high elders of the Great Canada Forest, showed a much softer side when in the company of his granddaughter.

Judging by all the war gear he was wearing, it seemed as if he had been on one of the expeditions to clear the capital.

“Welcome back, Fangas. Ariane and Arc were just telling me about an interesting new development.”

Dillan bowed his head respectfully before informing Fangas of what we’d just discussed.

“Hunh. Now that *is* interesting. I agree that it’s best kept from the humans for now. Why don’t we head back to Maple so I can discuss the matter with the high elders? I’m sure no one would object to offering assistance to the mountain people, but it still warrants a conversation. I’m sorry to ask this of you, Arc, but would you mind taking me to Maple?”

I nodded.

Dillan bowed his head again. “I’ll entrust the Maple side of things to you, Fangas.”

Fangas offered a toothy grin. “Leave it to me.”

After saying goodbye to Dillan, I used my teleportation magic within the confines of the tent to bring Ariane and Fangas to the forest capital of Maple.

Several hours later, we were finally underway in our borrowed cart, Ariane sitting up front with Chiyome and me in back.

“For just heading back to give an update, that sure did take a lot of time.”

Ariane frowned slightly. “I’m really sorry about Grandfather.” She let out an exhausted sigh.

I chuckled. “Fangas may be one of the high elders, but first and foremost, he’s a grandfather. We’ve been running around doing our own thing ever since the

whole Hilk ordeal. So I'm sure he was just looking for some time with his granddaughter."

Ariane held my gaze for a long moment, then let out another sigh.

As soon as we'd arrived in Maple, Fangas had invited Ariane out to lunch. She'd tried to turn him down by explaining she already had plans with me, but he wouldn't take no for an answer. I wound up getting dragged along as well. Not that I minded a nice lunch, of course.

It was well past noon by the time we'd finally gotten underway.

"I'm just sorry we made Chiyome wait so long. I shouldn't have taken Fangas up on his offer. Sorry about that."

Ponta also bowed its head apologetically. "Kyii!"

Ariane turned to the smaller figure by her side and bowed as well. "I'm sorry, Chiyome! I'll take you out to eat the next time we have a chance, okay?"

Chiyome's ears twitched, but she showed no other signs of emotion. "I'm used to waiting around."

Ariane bowed even lower. "I'm so, so sorry."

Ariane's impassioned plea seemed to catch Chiyome off guard. "Really, I'm fine, Ariane. But I look forward to going out to eat."

Ariane let out a long sigh of relief. "I'm so glad to hear that."

Chiyome shot me a concerned glance, but all I could do was shrug.

She was probably telling the truth when she said she was used to waiting. Ninjas had to sneak around and stay out of sight while conducting investigations. She would certainly have learned the art of patience.

I turned my attention to the serene scene rolling past the cart. Looking up at the gentle glow of the sun, I tried to gauge what time it was.

We'd eaten an early lunch, though it had still taken some time to travel back to the village, meet up with Chiyome, get in the cart, and then teleport to the city overlooking Lamburt.

Turning my attention back ahead, I saw the massive port of Lamburt, located

on the west coast of the Rhoden Kingdom. From our spot up in the hills, we had a fantastic view of the whole city.

Lamburt was a prosperous merchant hub built right along the channel that fed into the sprawling bay of Bulgoh, which ultimately connected to the South Central Sea. Sitting on the other side of the bay was the Nohzan Kingdom, one of their primary trading partners.

Goods would then make their way east, skirting around the Riebing Mountains as they traveled overland to Olav, the capital of the Rhoden Kingdom.

The seaside city was built between two massive waterways that were filled with countless boats brimming with all manner of goods. A quick look around showed a vibrant, active metropolis, suggesting that the destruction in Nohzan's capital of Saureah had had little impact on the local economy.

"Seems like there's something exciting going on every time I come here."

"Kyii!"

I had to duck my head to dodge Ponta's large tail before turning my attention to the looming city gate.

I handed over the travel pass I'd received from the local lord on a previous visit. The guard hurriedly waved our cart through.

We were heading to the new town district, to the south of the city center. More specifically, we were heading to Lahki's Shoppe, a modestly sized establishment located on a street packed with similar stores.

As we arrived, I spied a large number of people moving about excitedly in front of his shop. We stopped the cart and waited only a moment or two before someone came hurrying out to meet us. I'd been here many times before, but this person was entirely new to me. A new hire to deal with the increased business, maybe?

I informed the newcomer that we wanted a meeting with Lahki himself. They frowned for a moment before looking Ariane and myself over and telling us to wait where we were. With that, they once again ducked inside.

Under normal circumstances, a guest who showed up out of the blue without an appointment would be told to come back at another time, but it seemed that something about our appearance suggested this wasn't the best course of action. Sometimes, my ostentatious armor really paid off.

A few moments later, a familiar woman dressed in men's clothing, with her chestnut-colored hair tied back in a short ponytail, appeared and waved the cart inside. If I recalled correctly, this was Rea, one of Lahki's friends from his hometown.

"Heya, Arc! Lahki's waiting for you."

We drove the cart inside the building, left the horses to the stablehand, and grabbed our bags.

Looking around the shop, I was impressed to see a large number of employees. Apparently, the business had grown a lot more than I realized.

We followed Rea up to the second floor, where we found Lahki sitting at a large desk piled with parchment. After looking each document over, he would sign it with his pen and then hand it to an employee sitting nearby before reaching for the next one.



After several rounds of this, the young man finally seemed to notice our presence and looked up at me with a tired smile. “Ah, sorry about that. Please forgive my rudeness. It’s real busy lately.”

I shook my head. “No, I should be the one to apologize, what with stopping by unannounced.”

“I mean, it’s great and all that I was able to get my shipping business started thanks to the vessel you gave me and the lord’s support, but I’m beside myself trying to wrap my mind around all these things I’ve never done before. I was lucky enough to have a fellow shop owner introduce me to all these people who were able to help me out.”

Lahki let out a slow breath.

The vessel he was referring to was the was human pirate ship that had tried to attack our elven ship when we traveled to the southern continent.

It was quite a large ship, but the elves had no use for it, so I’d ultimately taken it for myself and given it to Lahki.

There were talks about finally opening up trade between the Rhoden Kingdom and the Great Canada Forest, so I’d approached him with the proposal of loaning the vessel to Petros, the lord of Lamburt, for use in trade.

Petros had already heard talk about the trade through his own sources and was eager to acquire ships, which made it easier to transfer ownership of the vessel to Lahki.

I’d figured this would do his business some good, but judging by the look on his face, it was all becoming too much for the young man to handle.

“I know I kind of pushed the ship on you, but it looks like things have gone as planned, right?”

Lahki nodded. “Thanks to the lord putting in a good word for me, I was able to get the ship repaired. There are still a lot of little details to work out, but I want to thank you for giving me such an invaluable opportunity. If there’s anything I can do for you, it’s as good as done.”

I could see the sincerity in his eyes. He might be out of his comfort zone right

now, but I could tell he'd be okay in the long run.

“Well, I’m certainly glad to hear that. Honestly, I was a little worried that someone as young as you could overcome the challenges involved. I can see you’re a much greater merchant than I gave you credit for.”

Lahki nervously scratched the side of his head. Then he perked up, as if remembering something, and gestured toward the back of the room.

“Excuse my manners, Arc. Let’s head on back before we spend all day chatting here.”

He then led us to a reception area on the other side of an ornamented door in the back of the office. The room was plainly decorated, though what few items adorned it spoke volumes about Lahki’s personal taste. He gestured for us to sit down.

We did, and Ponta dove into Chiyome’s lap, where it curled up.

Once we were all seated, Lahki got down to business. The grin never left his face as he eyed me with great curiosity. “So, what brings you here, Arc?” He pulled a small notepad out of his pocket.

“I’m here because I need some lumber. It’s not exactly pressing, though. I can work within your schedule.”

Lahki scribbled notes as I ran through the numbers. “I see. That’s certainly not an insignificant amount of lumber. I can’t get all that together immediately, but it shouldn’t be a problem. The only problem is that lumber has been in high demand. The price has risen a fair bit, so it’ll cost more than usual. Is that okay?”

I shook my head. “Not a problem. But why is there so much demand?”

He glanced around the room before responding in a whisper. “From what I hear, the Holy East Revlon Empire is buying it all up. There’re rumblings that they’re preparing for war.”

Ariane and Chiyome both scowled at this news. We’d been out there once before when we traveled to the city of Leibnizche following the trail of some enslaved elves.

Last time I saw Leibnizche, it was in ruins. I couldn't help but wonder what had happened to it since.

Though, more importantly... "War, huh? That certainly doesn't bode well."

Chiyome gave a firm nod. "Lumber is an absolute must for war. It serves as fuel for manufacturing weapons and armor and is also used to construct siege engines. If it really is the Holy East Revlon Empire buying up all the lumber, then they must have a reason for it."

Lahki nodded in agreement.

Ariane's golden eyes darted over to me, as if something had just occurred to her. "Hey, Arc, you remember the imperial soldiers we spotted on the border when we were heading to Leibnizche?"

I let the scene replay in my mind's eye. "Now that you mention it, yeah. I just thought they were trying to do something about the increased number of monsters on the border."

I cocked my head to the side as I searched further and further back into my memory. Chiyome screwed up her face into a scowl.

"From what I learned, soldiers were being dispatched in small groups over a long period of time. Assuming they were preparing for a large-scale invasion, that would also validate Lahki's story."

Lahki took a deep breath to regain his composure and looked at me with fear in his eyes.

I returned his gaze and cut to the heart of the matter. "What's their objective?"

Lahki put a finger to his chin. "I don't want to start making wild speculations, but I'd assume that they mean to strike west. The rival empires each desire nothing more than to be united once again...under their own control." He dropped his voice to a whisper again. "I've also heard talk that the Holy East Revlon Empire had gained the ability to control powerful monsters. They'd be able to make fast work of their enemies. Of course, that could all be completely false."

The merchant allowed himself a brief laugh to try to ease the tension, but no one else in the room joined him. Ariane and I exchanged a worried glance. There was something familiar about this ability to control monsters.

“Hey, Ariane, you don’t think they’re talking about that one guy, do you?”

Ariane shrugged.

Back when we’d snuck into the empire, we’d encountered a man who could control monsters...and also used elves for his research. He’d called forth a hydra to fight against us, and the ensuing battle had left the city of Leibnizche in ruins.

“That guy...Fumba, was it? He said he was a monster tamer. But...I killed him with my own hand.”

Ariane scowled. Even just the memory of the man was a source of frustration for her.

“It’s possible there was more than one monster tamer. Or maybe the rumor got out before we ever arrived there.”

She paused to think over these possibilities. They both had merit.

The fact that there was even one monster tamer meant that there could be others. And then there was the speed at which rumors tended to spread. Though we were able to use teleportation magic to travel to and from the empire in the blink of an eye, rumors were only capable of moving as fast as the people who carried them.

Though Leibnizche was close to the Rhoden border, it was still a several-day journey from Lamburt.

If they’d intended on using that monster tamer’s abilities to wage war, his death would have upended their plans. But would that have been enough to cause an entire empire to stop their war preparations?

Chiyome finally spoke up. “I think it would be best to tell Dillan and Master Hanzo about what we’ve heard today.”

Ariane and I both agreed.

“You’re right. We’re pretty much done here, so why don’t we head back to our respective villages?”

I turned back to Lahki. “Apologies. I think I got us off track. I’m not terribly concerned about the price of lumber, so please get started on it when you have a chance. Sorry for interrupting you like this.”

I bowed my head in apology, though Lahki didn’t show any sign of annoyance in the least. A warm, friendly smile graced his cheeks. “I wouldn’t have this shop in the first place if it weren’t for you, Arc. I’m more than happy to do anything I can to help you.” His expression changed as he seemed to recall something. “If you don’t mind my asking, what are you using the lumber for?”

“I plan on building a roof.”

“Oh? In that case you’ll need a specific kind of lumber. Do you mind if I make my own recommendations? Or do you have any preferences?”

I shook my head. “No, that’s fine. I’ll leave it to you.”

I hadn’t actually thought about the fact that there were different types of wood that might or might not be suitable for roofing. Alas, this was all beyond me. I didn’t even know what type of lumber was even available in this world. It seemed safest to leave these kinds of things up to Lahki and the craftspeople.

Lahki quickly jotted something down in his notepad. “All right, that’s all I need. I’ll load everything up in your cart like the other times. It should take about...hmm. Between seven to ten days, I think. Is that okay?”

“That’s absolutely fine.”

After agreeing on the details, I pulled a small leather bag out and handed it over as a deposit.

I had no idea what the market price for lumber was or what Lahki charged in fees, but I figured a down payment never hurt.

I would finally have everything in place to get a roof built. Or at least, I hoped so.

However, there was one more thing I needed to address while here at Lahki’s Shoppe. “Once this job’s done, maybe I can get them to work on another one...”

I was speaking to myself more than anyone else as I lifted the bag next to my feet and set it on the table. I pulled out a large piece of shimmering silver as

thick as my arm. It ended in a pointed tip, almost giving it the appearance of a metal stake. The next object I pulled out was a thick metal plate.

Lahki glanced back and forth between the two items. “Do you mind if I hold them?”

I slid them toward him. “Not at all. Go ahead.”

He seemed to struggle as he lifted the stake. He looked it over before tapping the metal plate a few times and furrowing his brow.

“Given everything you’ve brought to me in the past, I’d be inclined to say these are parts of some kind of monster, but I have absolutely no idea which one. I’ve been trying to study up on them lately, but I’m ashamed to admit that my knowledge is still shallow at best.” Lahki scratched the back of his head in embarrassment.

To be honest, I didn’t know all that much about monsters myself. I’d just happened across some of them on my travels and had brought back their parts whenever I could.

“This is a part of the shell and a stinger from a giant monster known as the morse seperis. We encountered it recently in the Great Canada Forest. I thought perhaps you might be able to sell it.”

I had no idea what the morse seperis’s body parts might be used for.

Considering how Ariane had responded when we’d encountered the thing back in the forest, it didn’t seem like they were all that common. They might even be unknown to humans. I was hoping Lahki could help me put a price on their parts.

Lahki hefted the stinger again. “You know, I just recently ran across that name in Carcy Held’s bestiary. If I recall correctly, it was some sort of huge monster that crawls around silently, right? Few who have encountered it live to tell the tale.”

He looked back down at the morse seperis stinger in amazement. Apparently, the creature wasn’t entirely unknown to humans, though the encyclopedia painted a pretty fierce picture of it.

The bestiary he spoke of had been penned by the famed monster researcher, Carcy Held. I'd met him, in fact, though entirely by chance.

Carcy was an elf living under the protection of a local lord in the human town of Branbayna, off to the west of Rhoden's capital. He was a bit of an oddball and chose to make his home there in order to research the monsters living in the region.

He'd personally given me a copy of his book, though I didn't recall seeing anything about the morse seperis. Then again, I'd only flipped through it and looked at the pictures, so it would probably do me some good to sit down and actually read it.

I offered Lahki a nonchalant nod. "Yeah, it was a bit of a pain in the neck." Even my mythical-class Holy Thunder Sword of Caladbolg couldn't cut through the thing.

Lahki's eyes twinkled with excitement at the metallic object in his hands. "According to the bestiary, the material of the morse seperis's carapace is called seperis steel. It's an incredibly valuable material used in weapon and armor manufacturing. It's considered a rare and valuable treasure."

It was my turn to be surprised.

It made sense, now that I thought about it. If you could turn the hardened shell into a shield and resist attacks from even mythical weapons, such an item would be coveted by any nation.

Lahki continued. "There's only one problem. Even the most seasoned metalworkers struggle to work the seperis steel. And those who could, the dwarves, have long since disappeared from this continent. I'm not really sure how much unworkable metal would actually fetch."

I shot a sidelong glance toward Ariane at the mention of dwarves. Years ago, they'd been hunted to extinction by the humans, due to their unmatched skills in metallurgy.

Or so they thought.

What the humans didn't know was that the dwarves were still alive in the elven capital of Maple in the Great Canada Forest, far away from any humans.

We'd given one of the monsters we'd taken down to the mountain people. The other we'd gifted, at Ariane's behest, to one of the workshops in Maple, to get in the elders' good graces.

I could have claimed the largest share of the monster, since I'd slain it, but I couldn't think of any way to use the massive hunk of metal, other than to leave it in the shrine as a decoration.

Ultimately, I only took a piece of the shell and one of the stingers, in the hopes of getting some money out of it.

With the amount of material we'd sent their way, I figured the dwarves should be good for a while. The humans, however, were unable to actually work the material. It would prove to be little more than a waste of space.

"Now, this pointed one on the other hand... I'm pretty sure they could work around the shape and turn it into a spear or something. I bet it'll fetch a hefty price."

From the way Lahki spoke, it sounded like this should at least cover the cost of the lumber.

"I trust you," I said. "I know it'll probably be some time before you can find a buyer, so take all the time you need to sell it. Anyway, that's all I've got for today." I stood up.

Lahki followed suit and bowed. "Well then, I humbly take possession of your valuable items."

I felt as if all eyes were on us as we left Lahki's Shoppe, but I decided to ignore it. We'd done what we came here to do.

"Kyiii..."

There was something plaintive about Ponta's cry. I glanced over to where it sat nestled in Chiyome's arms to find the little fox gazing longingly at all the fruits on display at various vendors' stands. The poor thing must have been hungry.

"Why don't I buy you a little snack, huh? You were really good back there while we were talking business."

“Kyii!”

Ponta squealed and gave its tail an extravagant wag as I turned toward one of the stalls. I was on autopilot as I paid for the dried fruits and handed a piece to Ponta.

I figured our next move was to head back to the Holy Hilk Kingdom. I’d hoped that once the whole Hilk ordeal had been dealt with, I’d have some time to sit back and relax, but it seemed like the menial tasks were going to keep on rolling in for the time being.

Ponta excitedly gnawed away at the fruit as I watched. I let out a sigh and directed my gaze upward, ignoring all the people who moved through the bustling Lamburt market around us.

The blue sky above was vast and unchanging.

Back at the refugee camp on the outskirts of Fehrbio Alsus, a loud groan escaped Dillan’s lips. “The eastern empire now too?”

Outside the tent, the sky was dyed orange and red. As the sun set, the camp filled with the scent of simmering stews. Dillan had been surprised to find us back here at such a late hour, but once we told him about the rumors we’d heard in Lamburt, he’d gone silent, deep creases lining his forehead.

Ariane offered up a more charitable interpretation of the news. “To be fair, we still don’t yet know if the eastern empire will actually make a move. It’s entirely possible that the loss of their monster tamer caused them to cancel or dramatically alter their plans.”

Dillan shook his head. “No, the soldiers you observed were likely moving in small squads so as not to be noticed as they prepared to invade. With the number of troops available to them, they must be prepared to strike at a moment’s notice. After all, the longer they wait, the more likely it is that they’ll be discovered. And that’s not even taking into consideration all the food and supplies needed to keep an army of that size standing by. Taken together, I’d say an attack is imminent...if it hasn’t already happened.”

If things were as he said, then it only made sense for the imperial forces to be

ready to move in short order.

“However, we don’t yet know that the Great West Revlon Empire is their target. I understand little of the affairs of humans, so it would be best to ask one of the officials here with us to offer some perspective. But even more importantly, if the empire really *was* able to find a way to control monsters, this invasion almost certainly won’t end with their western neighbor.”

Ariane and Chiyome both swallowed hard at this.

Fumba had been able to bend the immensely powerful hydra to his will. If the eastern empire could control other monsters like that, entire human armies would be cut down in the blink of an eye. Once they annexed their western counterpart, what was to stop them from turning their gaze south toward the Rhoden Kingdom and the Great Canada Forest?

“In any case, we’ll need to watch the eastern empire’s movements closely.”

Dillan nodded in agreement with my sentiment. “I’ll speak to the representative from the Nohzan Kingdom. Ariane, I’ll leave those from the Rhoden Kingdom up to you. Chiyome, would you please speak to Hanzo and the Jinshin clan about this?”

Chiyome, who’d been listening quietly to this whole conversation, nodded firmly. “Certainly.”

Dillan cast his gaze across the group. “I suppose it would be best to assemble all the representatives to discuss the situation. The Rhoden Kingdom would be the ideal location to hold this meeting, in my opinion. Will you help make the arrangements, Arc?”

I nodded. “Of course.”

The representatives he was referring to, of course, were those who’d assisted us in taking down the Holy Hilk Kingdom: King Asparuh of the Nohzan Kingdom and Margrave Wendly of the Salma Kingdom. Added to these two were Prince Sekt and King Karlon of the Rhoden Kingdom—who incidentally shared a familial relation with the Nohzan royal family—along with Hanzo, the leader of the Jinshin clan of the mountain people, and the high elder Fangas of the Great Canada Forest.

All told, it was a rather small group to discuss the fate of entire kingdoms.

Of the three countries that the Hilk had invaded, both Salma and Delfrent had fallen. The lands were in chaos, and there was no official word on the fate of the royal families.

With these kingdoms still in a state of panic, they were in no shape to muster any troops to fight external threats at the moment.

With the Hilk threat eliminated, the various representatives were focused on undoing the damage done to their own countries—tasks that would normally make it difficult for them to assemble in one place, but my long-distance teleportation magic quickly solved that issue.

In a world that relied on carriages and boats as its primary means of transportation, the idea of being able to travel to another country in a day or two would normally be ludicrous.

Dillan bowed his head in appreciation. “Thank you, Arc. Next, I’d like you to head to Branbayna to see if Carcy Held would agree to meet with me. I’d like to learn more about this monster tamer. If anyone might be able to offer some insight, I figure it’s him.”

Ariane scowled. “As long as he doesn’t make us join some weird monster-hunting expedition this time.”

She was recalling how we’d gone hunting for sand worms at Carcy’s request.

“We’re just going to talk to him this time, so I don’t imagine that will be a problem. But if you really aren’t interested, Ponta and I can go to Branbayna alone.”

“Kyii... Kyii!” Ponta mewed excitedly, as if to brag about how ready it was to join me on the adventure.

This elicited a look of annoyance from Ariane. “I never said I wouldn’t go. I was just thinking about how awful it smelled.” She shuddered and reached up to rub her shoulders.

I remembered how Carcy had filled up his cart with rotten goblin corpses to use as bait. They really had stunk. I could see where Ariane was coming from.

“I doubt we’ll learn anything specific about the tamers themselves, but we should be able to get at least *some* idea about what techniques they’re using to control monsters, which will aid in our understanding of the empire’s strength. There’s nothing more dangerous than fighting an unknown enemy.”

I was in full agreement. Humans who could control the mighty hydra were an immense threat indeed. If we could learn a little more about their methods, maybe we could find a way to counter them.

For example, if there was a limit to how many monsters a tamer could control at once, or a restriction on the distance, this would greatly reduce their effectiveness.

Though my Paladin abilities could wipe out countless enemies in the blink of an eye, it took a long time to activate these techniques, and even then, they only lasted for five minutes and required a long period to recharge. Though powerful, these abilities had their downsides. I hoped the same was true for monster taming.

Carcy had dedicated his life to conducting research on monsters, learning about their unique traits, and publishing his findings. This peculiar elf had made quite an impressive impact on the world and might even change the course of it, depending on what insights he could provide.

“Well, I think that’s about it,” Dillan said. “It’s almost nightfall, so why don’t you visit Carcy tomorrow? Also, would you mind taking me to Saureah while you’re at it? I apologize for the constant requests, but I’d like to discuss the issue with the king.” He hurried over toward the tent’s entrance. “Wait here for a moment. Someone will need to watch over the camp while I’m away, and I need to leave instructions.”

With that, he disappeared outside.

“Well, he was certainly in a hurry.”

Ariane nodded in agreement. “Arc, why don’t you take Chiyome to the hidden village now, so she can speak with Hanzo? I’ll wait for Father to return.”

“Got it. Are you ready, Chiyome?”

“Yes.”

“Kyii!”

Chiyome held Ponta close to her chest, its little legs dangling in the air.

I cast Transport Gate and teleported us to the hidden village in the Calcut Mountains, overlooking the capital of the Rhoden Kingdom. After dropping Chiyome off, I teleported back to the refugee camp to find Dillan and Ariane waiting for me.

After another quick stop to drop Dillan off at the Nohzan Kingdom, I took Ariane to see her grandfather, Fangas.

All in all, it was a busy night, though it spoke to how peaceful my life was at the moment if this was what counted as busy. With that comforting thought in mind, I performed one last teleportation out of Maple.

The next morning, I picked up Ariane and Ponta and took them with me to the town of Branbayna, located along the road that ran west from Rhoden’s capital and through the expansive Hibbot wastelands.

The town was built atop a gently sloping hill. Just beyond its stone walls I saw the outlines of large, boxy buildings. Though lacking the elegant grace of the capital, this fortified town had something oddly nostalgic about it that I liked.

My thoughts were interrupted by Ariane. “It’s been ages since we were last here.”

It hadn’t been all that long, as far as I could remember. While I was busy grumbling about this trivial detail, Ariane called out to me to get moving.

“Hey, hurry up, Arc. We still need to report back on what we learn after we talk to him.”

“Ah, yes. That’s right.”

“Kyii!”

I set Ponta atop my head and started walking across the hard-packed red dirt. I glanced at the fields of crops just outside the town. They were the only source of green to be seen.

A stone path led through the fields toward the entrance to Branbayna, where a lone guard greeted us.

“What brings you here, sir? Have you lost your way again?”

From the way he was talking, I figured this was the same guard we’d encountered the first time we’d come, when I actually *had* gotten us lost on our way to Lamburt.

I chuckled jovially. “No, no. We’re right where we want to be this time. We have business in Branbayna.”

The man looked at me quizzically.

“We’re here to meet with Carcy Held. I understand he’s living under the protection of your lord. I’d greatly appreciate it if you would let us pass.”

I moved my hulking frame to the side. His expression only grew more confused. Then he caught sight of Ariane standing behind me, and he audibly gasped as he took in her snow-white hair, golden eyes, and amethyst skin.

The last time we’d visited Branbayna, Ariane had been wearing a dark cloak with the hood pulled low to disguise her identity. However, I figured things would go a lot smoother if we were up-front this time around.

“You’re an elf...” The guard looked back and forth between Ariane and me before finally coming to his senses.

He called up to two more guards standing watch atop the wall. One of them came down to take his place, while the other ran ahead to announce us.

Once that was taken care of, he smiled at us. “Welcome to Branbayna. I will personally escort you to the lord’s manor.”

This hardly seemed necessary, but I decided to accept the offer rather than argue with him. “Greatly appreciated.”

“Kyii!” Ponta imitated me, trying to project an air of toughness from atop my head.

As we walked down the road, people—particularly men—stopped what they were doing to gawk. Ariane seemed to find the attention annoying and ducked into my shadow as much as possible. I imagined I looked like a knight protecting his princess. But since Ariane wasn’t at all the type to need protecting, the whole situation felt quite novel.

For a town built on the side of a lonely road, the center was surprisingly packed with people. Beyond the crowd, I spotted another large wall with towers jutting out of it. On the other side of it was the lord's estate.

Four guards stood in front of the entrance. The runner must have already told them of our approach, because the gate was raised.

"Please follow me."

The guard passed us off to an older gentleman who introduced himself as the captain before leading us through the wall.

We came to a large, square garden surrounded by an open-air hallway that ran between several buildings. The buildings here were somewhat on the small side, though larger than the homes in the town proper.

The captain guided us into a beautiful, two-story building constructed of stone. I recalled having been here before, on our previous visit. He stopped in front of a wooden door with a beautifully engraved crest and rapped the simple door knocker.

"It's oooopen!" A man's voice called out from within.

The captain of the guards opened the door and gestured us inside.

"I'll be here if you need me."

I thanked him and stepped through the doorway, making my way past a large dining table toward a room in the back.

Little had changed since the last time we'd been here. If anything, the room was a little more crowded.

The table at the center was covered in books and scrolls, while the shelves lining the walls were completely packed. Even the gorgeous carpet beneath our feet was covered in animal fangs, bones, fist-sized rocks, and other objects that didn't fit on the table. There was no place to even stand.

Amidst this mess sat a man at a desk in front of the large glass window. He slowly looked up at Ariane, Ponta, and me and greeted us in a sing-song voice.

"My, my... How long's it been? Not that long, actually! You know, I hadn't expected to see you again so soon. Apologies for the mess, but make yourselves

at home.”

The bespectacled man behind the desk with haphazardly cut green-tinted blond hair and the distinctive pointed ears of an elf finished his greeting with a gentle laugh. This was Carcy Held Landfrea, famed monster researcher.



“It *feels* like it’s been ages, Carcy.” A lot had happened since we’d last met. It was good to see him again.

Carcy seemed to read my mind. He grinned, pushing his glasses back up his nose. “Well, it looks like you two have been putting your time to good use.” He smiled warmly. “To what do I owe this honor?”

Ariane was the first to speak. “Let me take care of this, Arc.”

She went on to explain all of the events that had taken place since our last trip here. Carcy listened with great interest.

“And so we came here to ask you what you know about monster tamers,” she concluded.

Carcy crossed his arms and let out a low groan. “Wow. I mean, I never expected to hear such an extraordinary tale. Just think, Canada joining forces with the mountain people and humans to topple the Holy Hilk Kingdom? This is truly a monumental event! It would absolutely blow Skits’s mind if he heard about it. Ha ha ha! You know, now that I mention it, I haven’t seen Skits around lately.”

Skits was the lord who oversaw Branbayna.

“Oh, my. Just imagining the battle between you and the Dragon Lord... If only I’d been there! The sight would’ve seared itself into my mind’s eye. A pity I didn’t have the chance.” Carcy sighed heavily.

Were dragons even monsters? I couldn’t say for sure, but I distantly recalled Villiers Fim saying something about being a type of spirit. Then again, Carcy was also interested in Ponta and other spirit creatures.

Carcy’s attention suddenly shifted. “More importantly, I’m interested to hear that you, with your legendary teleportation abilities, are an elf. Do you think perhaps I could learn how to use them, too? Just imagine...being able to observe any monster wherever and whenever I pleased. It would be a dream come true.”

I could feel Ariane’s intense gaze on me. She was clearly annoyed at how far off topic we’d drifted.

I tried to steer us back on course. “So...do you know much about monster tamers?”

This brought Carcy back to reality. “Ah, right. To be honest, I don’t.”

Ariane’s shoulders slumped at this.

“However,” Carcy continued. “I’m intrigued by unique abilities concerning monsters as they pertain to my research. I know a bit about monster tamers, though my knowledge is limited.”

The elven researcher stood up from his seat and approached one of his brimming bookshelves.

“Supposedly there were clans of humans living off in the northeastern lands of the Holy East Revlon Empire. From time to time, a child would be born there who possessed the talent to control monsters, a talent that the clans used to keep themselves safe. Their homeland was inhabited by even *more* monsters than the rest of the northern continent, making it all but inhospitable to other humans.”

Humans tended to build their settlements in locations with relatively few powerful monsters. Unlike the elves, they intentionally avoided places where dangerous creatures lurked nearby.

The elves had chosen to live in the forest to escape the persecution they’d undergone at the hands of the humans. It was only thanks to their spirit magic and martial skills that they were able to do so. The teleportation points connecting their villages also helped a great deal.

“What I’d really love to know is whether they developed their abilities as a result of living in such an unforgiving land, or if those abilities brought them there in the first place.” Carcy pulled a well-aged book from the shelf and began flipping through it. “Remind me of that monster tamer’s name again?”

“Fumba Soodu Rozombanya,” Ariane replied.

“Hmm. This book mentions a group called the Soodu who possessed the power to control monsters. The Rozombanya were one of the clans who lived off in the northeastern lands. It seems like he somehow came into the employ of the empire.”

It sounded as if monster tamers were relatively rare, even among the clans, but hardly a one-time occurrence.

“So, does this mean there might be other monster tamers out there assisting the empire?” I asked.

“I’m not sure. It says here that only a few people were born with the powers of the Soodu. Since the clans needed these Soodu for their very survival, they wouldn’t be able to live if they just handed them over to the empire. Unless they were trading the Soodu for the empire’s protection.”

Ariane shook her head. “I didn’t see anyone else like Fumba in Leibnizche. So can we assume that the empire lost their ability to control monsters?”

“Who can say?” Carcy closed the book. “Even if you didn’t run into any other members of the Rozombanya clan, that doesn’t mean the empire isn’t a threat.”

“What makes you say that? What proof do you have?” Ariane demanded.

Carcy closed his eyes, as if arranging his thoughts. “The twin empires in the north are immense. While the ability to control a hydra would be serious business to a smaller country, to the rival empires, it’s still not enough to guarantee a victory. If we were talking about a Dragon Lord, that might be a different story, but beings like that are exceedingly rare. Especially among the humans.”

Ariane narrowed her eyes and glanced over at me.

I avoided her gaze and focused on Carcy.

“I don’t think the eastern empire would be stupid enough to rest their entire future on the shoulders of just one man. Sure, hydras are terrifying creatures, but they seem more than a little inconvenient to use as weapons of war, don’t you think?” Carcy held up a finger, looking like a wizened old priest. “As further proof, let’s talk about the hydra itself. They can be found in places with large bodies of water, such as lakes or wetlands, and not in dry places like this. Why is that?”

He looked back and forth between us. I raised my hand.

“Yes, Arc?”

“The hydra can’t survive without access to water, meaning that if you intended to use it for war, you could only do so in places with water nearby.”

Carcy beamed. “Correct! The hydra’s hydration needs make it incredibly unsuitable for an invasion. It’s one thing to keep a hydra in Leibnizche, since a large river runs out of the Siana Mountains. But it’s a different story entirely when you get out into the midlands. Why, there’s so little water that a hydra wouldn’t last even three days.”

The hydra seemed like a pretty fierce creature to me—what with its speedy regeneration and powerful attacks—so it felt almost absurd to hear that water was such a critical weakness.

“You’re right, that definitely makes things problematic.”

“Okay,” Ariane said. “I get that the hydra isn’t all that useful in war, but what does that have to do with whether or not the empire can control *other* monsters?”

“Monster tamers are certainly powerful,” Carcy said. “But even if the empire has someone with that talent, it doesn’t really change the bigger picture. You see, the power to control monsters isn’t innate, but rather a power that someone with the talent can *learn*.”

Ariane, I, and even little Ponta stared at Carcy in silence as we tried to comprehend what he was saying.

“Kyii?”

Carcy smiled warmly at the cottontail fox before turning his attention back to us. “Those born with the proper talent are thought of by the clan as suitable for training. What they actually wield is a form of sorcery—not some miracle from the heavens, but a simple technique, much like the spirit magic and sword skills we elves use. Not everyone will be equally good at it, but they can still learn it, all the same. This power is no different.”

Ariane’s eyes went wide. “So...you’re saying that Fumba could have taught the imperial troops how to tame monsters?”

If they'd managed to create some sort of Monster Tamer Corps... The mere thought was terrifying.

But Carcy shook his head at Ariane's theory. "No, I don't believe it's that simple. Right now the Holy East Revlon Empire is building up its strength by pouring a great deal of resources into developing magical items. Specifically, ones that can be used for war. What if they managed to create some sort of item that gives a person the ability to tame monsters?"

Ariane swallowed hard. "All the empire would have to do is gather a bunch of monsters and they'd have a formidable force right there. Throw them into a weakened enemy and you could win a war with a single strike."

They could keep their human forces safely in the rear while attacking with this monster corps. The imperial army could then overrun any remaining troops.

I imagined the haunted wolves Fumba had used against us facing off against calvary, and ogres smashing their way through rank upon rank of infantry.

If the empire had created technology that allowed them to tame monsters, there was no way they wouldn't use it.

"Of course, this is all just speculation," Carcy assured us. "Hard to say for sure."

Though his words offered a thread of hope, his dark expression suggested otherwise.

Chapter 4:

Diverging Paths

RHODEN'S CAPITAL CITY, Olav, sat amid an expansive field of green, bordered on one side by the Lydel River that ran out of the base of the Calcut mountain range. The city itself was protected from the outside world by four towering walls of stone, at the center of which stood the royal palace.

The majestic city served as a symbol of all of humanity's accomplishments.

The Rhoden Kingdom was the third most powerful country on the northern continent, following the dueling Revlon empires, and was also part of the coalition that had joined forces to take down the Holy Hilk Kingdom.

In one of the palace's expansive rooms, a large number of tables had been lined up together and covered with a cloth to create the appearance of one large table. The representatives from the coalition nations were seated around it.

At the head of the table sat King Karlon Delfriet Rhoden Olav, the ruler of Rhoden Kingdom.

The elderly man's forehead was creased with deep wrinkles, and a long beard took up much of his face. The recent upheaval clearly weighed heavily on his shoulders, but his bright blue eyes spoke of the fiery intellect that still burned within him.

He was joined by two members of the royal family, Prince Sekt Rondahl Karlon Rhoden Sahdiay and Princess Yuriarna Merol Melissa Rhoden Olav.

Sekt was a handsome man with light-brown hair, instead of his father's blond hair, and a charming smile. He and his father shared the same powerful blue eyes. The connection between the two was undeniable.

Yuriarna had wavy golden locks, just a tinge more yellow than her father's, and beautiful brown eyes. Her round face betrayed her young age, though her gaze carried with it the same force as her father and brother.

Next was King Asparuh Nohzan Saureah, ruler of the Nohzan Kingdom. His nation sat across from the Bay of Bulgoh and was a longtime trade partner of the Rhoden Kingdom's.

In stark contrast to King Karlon, King Asparuh had a round face and a friendly demeanor. He was also the older brother to King Karlon's late wife, so the two royal families were connected by both law and blood.

Off to his side sat the young but capable eleven-year-old Nohzan princess, Riel Nohzan Saureah. Her skin was as pale as porcelain, and the tips of her vivid blonde hair curled slightly where they dangled at her shoulders. Her expression spoke of her innocence, as well as her nervousness over being here.

Margrave Wendly du Brahnief, the representative from the Salma Kingdom, was a powerful, heavily built man with a receding hairline and a thick white mustache. He showed no sense of apprehension over sitting among nobility. In fact, there was a look of strength and confidence in his face, a credit to his long military career.

The margrave was the last of the human representatives. Beyond him were representatives of an entirely different sort.

First up was the third founding elder and head of the elven realm in the Great Canada Forest, Briahn Bond Evanjulin Maple. He was the highest-ranking elder of all the elves, greater in importance than even the individual elders who ruled the villages. He looked no older than forty and sat there, calm and composed, scanning the crowd with pale green eyes. Briahn's long, green-tinged blond hair was tied back with ornamental cords, exposing two long pointed ears.

It was rare for Briahn to travel outside of Maple, but the significance of the day's events justified the outing.

Next was a two-meter-tall, muscular dark elf with amethyst skin and a piercing golden gaze. The large scar marking his face gave Fangas Flan Maple, Ariane's grandfather, an intimidating appearance. During the battle against the Holy Hilk Kingdom, Fangas had fought on the front lines against hordes of the undead. He lived in a world far removed from that which the noble-born humans inhabited.

After the elven delegation was Hanzo—the twenty-second in the line of

Hanzos—who led the military group of cat people known as the Jinshin clan. He was here as the representative for the mountain people.

Hanzo looked something like a stereotypical hermit, with thick, bushy white eyebrows and a long beard. Though he appeared to be a gentle old man, there was a degree of toughness just below his skin. Much like the elves, he kept himself away from the prying eyes of humans. But he'd agreed to join this meeting as a sign of trust, given the recent efforts that had freed so many of his people.

Next to him sat a hulking figure even more massive than Fangas—Goemon, one of the six great warriors of the Jinshin clan.

He was covered in gray-and-black fur, giving him the appearance of a muscle-bound tabby cat. Two distinctive ears crowned his head, while a long tail extended from his lower back. In a way, he was almost cute.

Goemon had also fought on the front lines, using his earth-based magic to great effect. Even when surrounded by a large number of human knights, he'd managed to take them down with minimal effort.

He sat silently at Hanzo's side with his arms crossed, looking down from his immense height at everyone around the table. It was clear that he was there as Hanzo's bodyguard, rather than a representative.

Under normal circumstances, seating wouldn't have been left up to the attendees' discretion, with royalty choosing to have their various advisors seated with them in order of rank and power.

This was the same even when conducting meetings with other royals, where the parties involved would closely evaluate each other country's size, status, and rank and then assign seating accordingly—rarely without some arguments involved.

In fact, it was almost unthinkable to conduct a meeting in such a large space with open seating. From the point of view of the humans, it was insulting to do so.

For the non-humans, however, this was simply common sense. Not only that, but the elves found the very concept of basing one's seat purely on relative

influence to be patently absurd.

Since this meeting had been called on such short notice, it had been decided that the seating would follow the elven style—a decision that spoke of the true power wielded by the elves. In many ways, the humans were beginning to see the Great Canada Forest as a kingdom in its own right.

There were some nobles who still considered the elves to be little more than barbarians living in monster-infested forests on the fringe of civilization. But those who actually knew the scale of elven ingenuity were now true believers.

It was clear to all human nobles, however, that the elves' military strength was far more advanced than the humans'.

A creature known as a Dragon Lord, a sworn protector of the elves, had even joined the field of battle at their behest. Dragon Lords were so powerful that they could level an entire city with a single blast. The humans had nothing that could counter such power.

What's more, the elven warriors were able to call upon spirit magic, a skill that made them more powerful than any of the kingdoms' best soldiers. And that was saying nothing of Fangas, who was in a class unto himself.

It had also recently come to light that the elves were able to use teleportation magic, which allowed its user to move to far-flung places in the blink of an eye. To those who saw it, it was like something ripped straight from a fairy tale.

This technique was considered particularly intimidating by humans, as it meant the possibility of instantly transporting a large force right into the center of a city, bypassing all of its defenses. Essentially, the humans could no longer rely on their numbers to attack or defend.

Teleportation magic had also played a major role in allowing this meeting to take place with such short notice.

Of course, elves weren't the only non-humans in attendance. There were also the species that the humans collectively referred to as "beast people" but who referred to themselves as "mountain people."

The mountain people had no country of their own on the northern continent. Instead, they lived in small clans that all too often ended up being enslaved or

exterminated by the humans. The Jinshin clan had sworn to free their enslaved comrades and had destroyed many slave markets in the process.

The slave markets had made demands to their ruling kingdoms and other local nobles to do something about these newly freed slaves. But if they tried to hunt them down, the mountain people vanished into the shadows, or else were far too powerful for the search parties to stand up against.

Until recently, humans had had little meaningful contact with either the elves or the mountain people. But they needed to get on board quickly. Maintaining their attitude toward the mountain people would have an incredibly negative impact on their developing relationship with the elves—and it was easy to imagine just what kind of future awaited them if they were to harm their relationship with such powerful new allies.

They also couldn't ignore how helpful the mountain people had been in the recent conflict.

Not only had the Hilk's influence weakened, and their human-first attitudes along with it, but the impact that the mountain people had had in making this happen—while saving countless human lives—was undeniable.

That didn't mean, however, that all nobles understood the magnitude of recent events. There were still those who felt a strong repulsion toward non-humans. If they were allowed to take power, it would mean an end to the long-awaited peace that had finally arrived.

This was why this meeting would only be attended by the representatives and their retainers.

Alas, the very sight of elves and mountain people walking confidently through the halls of the palace had already caused countless rumors to spread throughout the capital.

King Karlon cast his gaze across all of those in attendance before speaking. "I realize that our battle has only recently ended, and I apologize for summoning you back while you're still returning order to your lands. I understand that you've already been briefed on the reason for today's meeting, so I'll get right into it."

All eyes settled on Rhoden's king.

"We are here today at the request of the representatives of the Great Canada Forest, but first I would like to take a moment to acknowledge the recovery efforts of those who've suffered at the hands of the Holy Hilk Kingdom. If you need any support, I trust those of us in attendance will do our best to come to your aid. Any objections?"

Those gathered around the table nodded silently. After confirming all were in agreement, King Karlon turned his attention to King Asparuh.

Nohzan's king cleared his throat. "If I may be so presumptuous, I would like to discuss the status of the Nohzan Kingdom. The Holy Hilk Kingdom crossed over our shared border to the northwest before driving toward the capital, ravaging nearly all villages and towns they encountered along the way. Fortunately, thanks to some powerful forces who came to our aid, our capital was spared." King Asparuh turned his attention to the elves in attendance. "I've requested—and was granted—permission to send the majority of our troops who participated in the assault on the holy capital out to survey the damage and provide support where possible. Even though the damage to our kingdom is great, it's not a danger to our survival."

The king seemed to be about to end his speech when suddenly he remembered something else.

"Ah, yes. I received some information about our neighbor to the north, the Delfrent Kingdom. Though the capital city of Lione fell and the royal family was murdered, elven soldiers were able to wipe out the hordes of undead. The rest of the lands were left mostly unscathed, so I fear that infighting will soon begin."

He slumped back down in his chair and let out a long, slow breath.

King Karlon turned his gaze to Margrave Braham of the Salma Kingdom.

"I suppose I'm next." The margrave ran a hand through his receding white hair, the exhaustion evident in his voice. "I'm sure none of this is new to you, but when Larisa fell to the undead legions, most of our citizens escaped to the sea, where they're struggling to eke out a meager existence. The remaining nobles are arguing over which of the surviving members of the royal family will

assume the throne. Currently, no one group holds all the power.”

Brahnief sighed and waved a hand dismissively.

“None of those idiots understand the point behind the treaty, and no matter who winds up taking control, I doubt they’ll ever agree to become a signatory. I’m immensely thankful to the elven warriors of Canada who worked so hard to free those trapped inside the capital and make it safe once again, but at this point in time, I’ve asked them to leave Larisa. These foolish nobles are intent on making more and more enemies, and it’s no longer safe for elves in our lands.”

Fangas nodded at the margrave’s assessment. Clearly, he’d already agreed to this request.

“I feel bad for those living near the capital, of course, but I also had to withdraw my own forces to keep watch over my territory. I’d say the odds are good that a civil war will erupt shortly. It’s possible the country may cease to exist entirely, much like Delfrent.” A pained look stretched across Brahnief’s face.

Prince Sekt looked puzzled. “Why don’t *you* take over the Salma Kingdom? I apologize if I’m being forward here, but if Larisa is in the state you describe, it should be of little challenge for you to take control.”

Margrave Brahnief’s eyes went wide for a moment, then he belted out a hearty laugh. “You’re right, it wouldn’t take much to overthrow the capital right now. But I’m far too old for all the drama involved in running a kingdom. Now, don’t take that to mean I’m endorsing any of the surviving members of the royal family. But I’ve got my hands full simply keeping my own lands in order. I’d probably die if I took on any more.”

Sekt raised an eyebrow. Yes, Margrave Brahnief was certainly on the older side, and the amount of work it would take to win over the opposition and seize the throne would be immense. But the young prince clearly couldn’t understand why someone with blatant disrespect for the royal family *wouldn’t* want to wrestle away control for himself.

“Your own lands must surely be affected by the discord in the capital, no?”

The margrave rested one elbow on the table as he stroked his mustache. “I’d

be lying if I said it would have no impact on us. But I've always been rather independent from the idiots in the capital. Even if they send some kind of demand for assistance, I plan on treating them like a completely separate nation. Why shouldn't I ignore them? They've never helped me anyway."

King Asparuh looked taken aback by the Salma Kingdom's dysfunctional affairs, especially considering how many times they'd faced off in the past.

The king's surprise drew a smile from Brahniey. "I was thinking this would be a good opportunity for me to declare my independence. Or maybe I could finally open up the route between Saureah and Dimo. In any case, I plan on letting the infighting run its course before making my move."

Princess Riel looked as surprised by this sudden revelation as her father did. She sat a little straighter in her chair.

The margrave oversaw a land known as Brahniey—a land that had once belonged to the Nohzan Kingdom, before the Salma Kingdom invaded and took Brahniey for itself. This cut off Nohzan's territory of Dimo, and the only way to access it was through Brahniey.

The margrave's proposal would finally bring the Brahniey lands back under Nohzan's control.

"Of course, these are just my personal thoughts on the matter. Whether I can convince people to accept their neighbors as compatriots, after years of feuding, remains to be seen. At present, this is merely one of many options on the table."

King Asparuh laughed at this obvious attempt to backtrack. "Delfrent, Nohzan, Salma... Why, all of our nations have expanded and contracted continuously throughout our long histories. I see no reason for that to stop now. Is there anything we can do to accelerate this transition?"

Both men smiled.

King Karlon watched the exchange with great interest as Prince Sekt leaned over to whisper in his ear. "It looks like we may have found our western ally."

The king kept his gaze straight ahead and nodded. "I would like to ask that Nohzan serve as the leader of the western front. Fortunately for us, the Olav

and Saureah families already share a connection. However, I think it may do us some good to further strengthen our ties.”

Sekt turned his attention to his sister, Yuriarna.

Nohzan’s royal family consisted of the king and his three children—two princes and a princess. King Asparuh’s daughter was still only eleven years old and a good deal younger than Sekt, so *that* marriage prospect was rather unlikely. Which meant the only option would be for Princess Yuriarna to join Saureah’s royal family.

Princess Yuriarna’s ears flushed a pale pink as she realized the implications of what her father had just said. She looked to King Asparuh.

But before the conversation could go any further, Fangas spoke up. “Well, then, I guess I’ll talk about how events have unfolded down at Fehrbio Alsus.”

All eyes fell on him.

“Thanks to the efforts of the elven warriors and members of the Jinshin clan, the city is now entirely clear of undead. Alas, the number of casualties is simply too high for the capital to function as is. That’s assuming they would even want to rebuild. Many survivors are still terrified of the prospect of the undead and have no desire to return to the city. The refugees are currently living out of a camp, but we are slowly beginning the process of moving them to nearby towns and villages.”

Both King Asparuh and Margrave Brahniey furrowed their brows at this report.

While the casualties inflicted on innocent citizens during the battle to oust the pontiff had certainly been immense, the capital had had a huge population to begin with, meaning that there were still a significant number of survivors.

It would be quite a challenge to move these refugees to the neighboring towns. Each could maybe take on ten or twenty new people, but to suddenly increase their populations by several hundred would be an immense strain.

If these people were unable to find a way to make a living, they might resort to begging or banditry.

Making matters worse, they'd also bring word about what had happened within the holy capital. It was hard to say how the local officials might react to that knowledge, though it was likely that the larger cities would isolate themselves and turn away the refugees.

Their rulers might not have a problem if it were merely a matter of increasing the number of working adults within their city limits, but a large number of needy refugees with nothing but the clothes on their backs was another matter entirely. Each city would need to temporarily close its gates and make a determination about each and every individual before letting them in.

Those who weren't allowed in would move on to the next city, with no guarantee that they'd be granted permission to enter there either. The further these refugees had to travel, the more desperate they'd become. It was a downward spiral.

If enough of them turned to banditry, they might grow large enough in number to take on small villages and towns, causing a marked drop in safety throughout the country.

With no overarching leadership within the Holy Hilk Kingdom, in the form of the pontiff or his cardinals, bandits would no longer need to worry about any national effort to quash them and would only have to deal with local armies. They could quickly become a major nuisance.

Margrave Brahniey's territory didn't share a border with the Holy Hilk Kingdom, so the impact on him would be minor. However, this did not hold true for the Nohzan Kingdom.

While they could certainly dispatch soldiers to stand guard along their western border, these lands had already suffered greatly during the earlier invasion by the Hilk. There was simply no way they had enough soldiers to both aid their own people and guard their borders.

This was quite the vexing problem for King Asparuh.

Fangas spoke up again. "I made the decision to give a fixed sum of money, paid out from gold recovered from the church's coffers, to anyone who makes the decision to leave the refugee camp. I authorized this myself, as I believe it would help contribute to these people starting a new life."

He looked at each of the humans in turn. King Asparuh and Margrave Brahnief seemed relieved to hear this, while King Karlon nodded without any objection.

Fangas continued. "I would like to do the same for the rest of the refugees, as I imagine they're getting quite tired of living in the camp. It's also about time that we send Rhoden's soldiers, Canada's warriors, and members of the Jinshin clan home."

He paused and once again looked to each of the human representatives. No one seemed to oppose this. No nation could support another forever.

Fangas cleared his throat. "I believe it will be difficult to care for the refugees much longer. But if we abandon them, they'll do what they must in order to survive, and the borders that Nohzan, Salma, and Delfrent share with the Holy Hilk Kingdom could become more unstable. I think it would be best to split up the refugees and send them out into these territories."

Everyone appeared to be in agreement with this plan.

"Once we secure each location that will take in a group of refugees, we'll teleport them there. I'd like to ask that you begin searching for these locations at once. I hope you understand that Canada is not considering taking in any refugees at present."

No one appeared to have any objection to this either.

It would cause nothing but problems to take people who'd lived under the Hilk's teachings and ask them to live among elves. Besides, the elves had already offered up a great deal, including their powerful warriors on the field of battle and their ability to quickly move soldiers from one location to another.

The handling of the refugee crisis would be left to the humans.

Once the meeting concluded, King Karlon would summon all of the various lords throughout the kingdom to the palace, to brief them on the new treaty and to discuss the refugees.

Though few of the nobles were dyed-in-the-wool Hilk believers, the king *did* expect some pushback on this. Yuriarna planned to use the cultivation rune stones she'd acquired through trade with the elves as a way to get them on

board.

King Asparuh had other plans. The refugees could be hired as laborers to help speed up the recovery of the western part of the Nohzan Kingdom, where the losses were greatest. They would also help to replace the lost population, though no one said that aloud.

“The pontiff’s two remaining cardinals, Elin Luxuria Castitas and Baltord Spelvia Humilitas, are still unaccounted for. The refugees have provided all the information they have, but we’ve learned very little about Cardinal Humilitas. Anyway, that’s all I have to report.”

Fangas sat down in his chair, leaned back, and crossed his arms to signal he was finished.

The cardinals he spoke of were both incredibly powerful creatures. According to King Asparuh and others who’d witnessed it for themselves, one could lose an entire company’s worth of soldiers when trying to take them down. For King Karlon and Princess Yuriarna, who hadn’t seen one of them in action, it was hard to comprehend just how powerful they were.

Prince Sekt, however, had engaged in battle against a cardinal first-hand and spoke of the absurd power he’d witnessed. His stories were corroborated by the soldiers who’d served with him.

Just a short time ago, the knowledge that the elves could take down such immensely powerful creatures would have been of great concern to King Karlon. Yet now he found himself in a position where he could be thankful for such allies.

Considering these two monsters had served as cardinals and leaders of the Holy Hilk Kingdom, they definitely couldn’t be underestimated. The fact that they were still unaccounted for was a terrifying thought to contemplate for nations about to begin the process of rebuilding.

“The fact that they can just hide among humans so easily is nothing short of a nightmare.” King Asparuh furrowed his brow.

Prince Sekt spoke up. “This is only a theory, but I wonder if they might have escaped to Revlon. All they’d have to do is travel west from the capital, cross

the Beek Sea, and they'd find themselves in the Great West Revlon Empire."

Margrave Brahniey frowned. "With the pontiff dead, I don't see them staying out there for long, though."

With a nod from Briahn, Fangas cleared his throat and picked up where Sekt had left off. "I've had my researchers back in Maple go over all the clues we've been able to gather, though we've yet to come across anything definitive."

A series of sighs echoed around the room. These creatures could easily destroy an entire city, and they were out on the loose. This posed a significant problem.

After letting the silence hang, Briahn spoke. "I understand your concern over the whereabouts of such monsters, but I've already assigned the task of tracking them down, so I ask that you leave it to us. Instead of worrying, invest your energies in restoring your kingdoms to their previous grandeur."

Briahn's soft, clear voice seemed to resonate with everyone in the room. However, those in attendance could sense that there must be an additional reason why the leader of the Great Canada Forest would make such a rare personal appearance. The fact that he'd emphasized the need to restore their kingdoms as soon as possible did not bode well.

"I have something else I'd like to discuss, unrelated to the battle with the Holy Hilk Kingdom. In fact, it has to do with the empire Prince Sekt just spoke of. Some...information has come to my attention."

Everyone in the room tensed up at this. Due to the contentious relationship between the East and West Revlon Empires, the rest of the nations on the northern continent were able to remain relatively peaceful. While the Delfrent, Nohzan, and Salma kingdoms were protected by the Rutios Mountains, the Rhoden Kingdom shared a border with the Holy East Revlon Empire and could only count on this ongoing conflict to keep them at bay.

"I've received reports that the eastern empire has invaded the western empire," Briahn continued. "Reports are still vague, but a western empire city has already fallen."

Several gasps broke the silence.

Yuriarna, however, regarded Briahn with some skepticism. “Small-scale military actions are nothing new for these two empires. The loss of a city is certainly worth notice, but there must be something else that has caused you alarm.”

Briahn turned to face the young princess. “You’re right, of course. Were this a small-scale affair, I wouldn’t be here telling you this. However, it seems that the eastern empire has gained the ability to control monsters.”

The shock at this news was palpable. King Karlon and Prince Sekt both shouted at the same time.

“Are you sure?!”

“Is this true?!”

Briahn nodded. “I don’t have all the details yet, but from what I hear, a legion of monsters under the control of the eastern empire was used to great effect in toppling the city. Much of what I’ve heard is little more than third-hand accounts and rumors, but apparently, losses to the imperial forces were minimal.”

This caused another round of nervous murmurs.

Disputes broke out between the twin empires every few years or so, but those were quite a bit different from what Briahn was describing now. The very idea that monsters were being used to wage war left everyone’s mouths suddenly dry—due in no small part to how closely this resembled the pontiff’s army of the undead.

The margrave nervously stroked his mustache. “If the eastern empire’s losses were as small as you say, then it’s only a matter of time until the western empire succumbs.”

The whole room was still. Would the eastern empire be satisfied with simply annexing the western one?

Everyone knew the answer to this question without it even having to be raised.

The moment the western empire fell, the eastern empire would turn its gaze

to the bountiful farmlands in the south.

After the recent assault by the Holy Hilk Kingdom, the Salma, Delfrent, and Nohzan kingdoms were in no position to resist another invading force.

The humans clearly hadn't anticipated such a situation...except for Prince Sekt of the Rhoden Kingdom.

Though Emperor Domitianus of the Holy East Revlon Empire had ascended to the throne at an incredibly young age, he'd wasted no time in consolidating his power base among the various nobility throughout his lands—building up and reorganizing the imperial army and pouring resources into researching magical items and other technologies that would help him wage war.

Prince Sekt had been watching these developments closely and had realized that the emperor was putting a plan in motion to topple the Great West Revlon Empire. But even though he'd foreseen this part, the idea that they'd use monsters to supplement their forces hadn't entered into his most terrifying nightmares.

"I'd like to ask a question, if I may. Is the eastern empire using magical items to control these monsters? I know they've been researching these technologies for some time."

Prince Sekt watched as a look of surprise washed over Briahn's face.

Carcy had theorized that such magical items might be used to control monsters, but that had been little more than a guess. That the human prince would reach the same conclusion was quite a shock.

"Some have reported that the monsters were domesticated from a young age to obey their master's commands, but we personally feel that magical items must have been involved. There's a clan of people living near the eastern empire who possess techniques for controlling monsters. Some of our researchers believe that the empire recreated those techniques using magical items." Briahn let out a resigned sigh.

"May I ask a question, Elder Briahn?" Yuriarna piped up. "The elves are unmatched on this continent when it comes to their ability to make magical items. Do you truly think such a thing as you describe is possible?"

Briahn smiled warmly. “Thank you for the compliment. I have spoken to our artisans and researchers, and they believe that as long as someone has the ability to control monsters, it would be a simple matter to break this ability down to its components and infuse it in a magical item. The technology would be incredibly difficult to copy, however.”

Those gathered around the table scowled. In general, once a technology was discovered, one would be hard-pressed to wipe it out entirely. However, if no one knew how to reproduce this particular technology, then it would be nearly impossible to stand up to the Holy East Revlon Empire.

“U-um, Elder Briahn...” Princess Riel said. “I, um, I was wondering... Assuming there really is some kind of item for taming monsters, what kind of monsters could it control?”

Briahn gave a helpless shake of the head. “I’m sorry, Princess, but I’m afraid I don’t have the answer to that. According to our researchers’ best guesses, it would be unlikely that they could control any and all types of monsters. We believe that the monsters must be intelligent enough to understand commands but not so intelligent that they would fight being controlled.”

Sekt muttered to himself. “In that case, we can rule out any monsters in the insect line. We can also probably exclude any that would be difficult to capture in large numbers.”

Princess Yuriarna looked at her brother in surprise, but he merely arched an eyebrow at her and turned away.

“In any case,” King Karlon said, “those of us here united under the treaty will likely find ourselves facing off against the empire soon. We must build our lost forces back up and restore our damaged countries—and quickly.”

Briahn nodded.

With that, the gathered representatives promised to help their partner nations rebuild, though they all knew that this would be no easy task. Not a single person present looked hopeful about their chances.

“Job’s done.”

I reached back and hit my fist against my lower back several times, stretching the tense muscles.

“Kyii... Kyii!”

Ponta cheered me on from its perch atop my head.

The job I referred to was teleporting to all of the various places where the representatives—those who’d originally signed the multi-species treaty—attending the meeting in the Rhoden Kingdom lived...and then teleporting them to the palace in Rhoden.

The meeting would be held just after noon, so I figured that most of the representatives were probably relaxing in their provided rooms or speaking with the others. I had to admit, it had been a lot more tiring than I’d thought it would be to teleport all these important people from the Nohzan Kingdom, the Great Canada Forest, the village in Calcut, and other locales all day.

I wanted nothing more than to head back to my shrine and take a dip in the hot spring.

It had been only a week since the meeting was first suggested, and the only thing that had even made this international conference possible on such short notice was my long-distance teleportation magic.

I tried to feel at least somewhat proud of myself as I rolled my shoulders to release the tension.

The meeting would take place over two days, and then I would have to take everyone back home. But until then, I was free to take care of some pressing tasks of my own.

I glanced around at my surroundings. I was standing in the middle of a hall in Rhoden’s palace. The floor of the hall was made of beautiful marble, polished so perfectly that I could see my own reflection in it as I walked.

“Kyii!”

Ponta excitedly swished its tail back and forth, seemingly enjoying seeing its own reflection.

The walls were lined with exquisite decorations and works of art spaced at

even intervals. It almost felt as if I were walking through a museum. I could only imagine how nervous I would have been as a mere commoner walking through the halls of the palace.

“Arc? Aaarc! Aaaaarc?!”

There was something rather adorable about the voice calling my name that caused me to quickly turn around. I was greeted by the sight of a young noblewoman and her chambermaid.

The chambermaid had short-cropped red hair and intense hazel eyes. Her dress must have been starched. There wasn't a single wrinkle to be seen.

The noblewoman at her side had wavy chestnut-colored hair, a slender face, and long eyelashes. There was something almost ephemeral about her appearance, though I could sense the warmth of her personality just by looking at her face.

She was wearing a dress that was somewhat mature for her age, but considering the air of maturity she gave off, I didn't think anyone would find it strange.

I tilted my head to the side. I knew I'd seen this pair before, But I just couldn't place them.

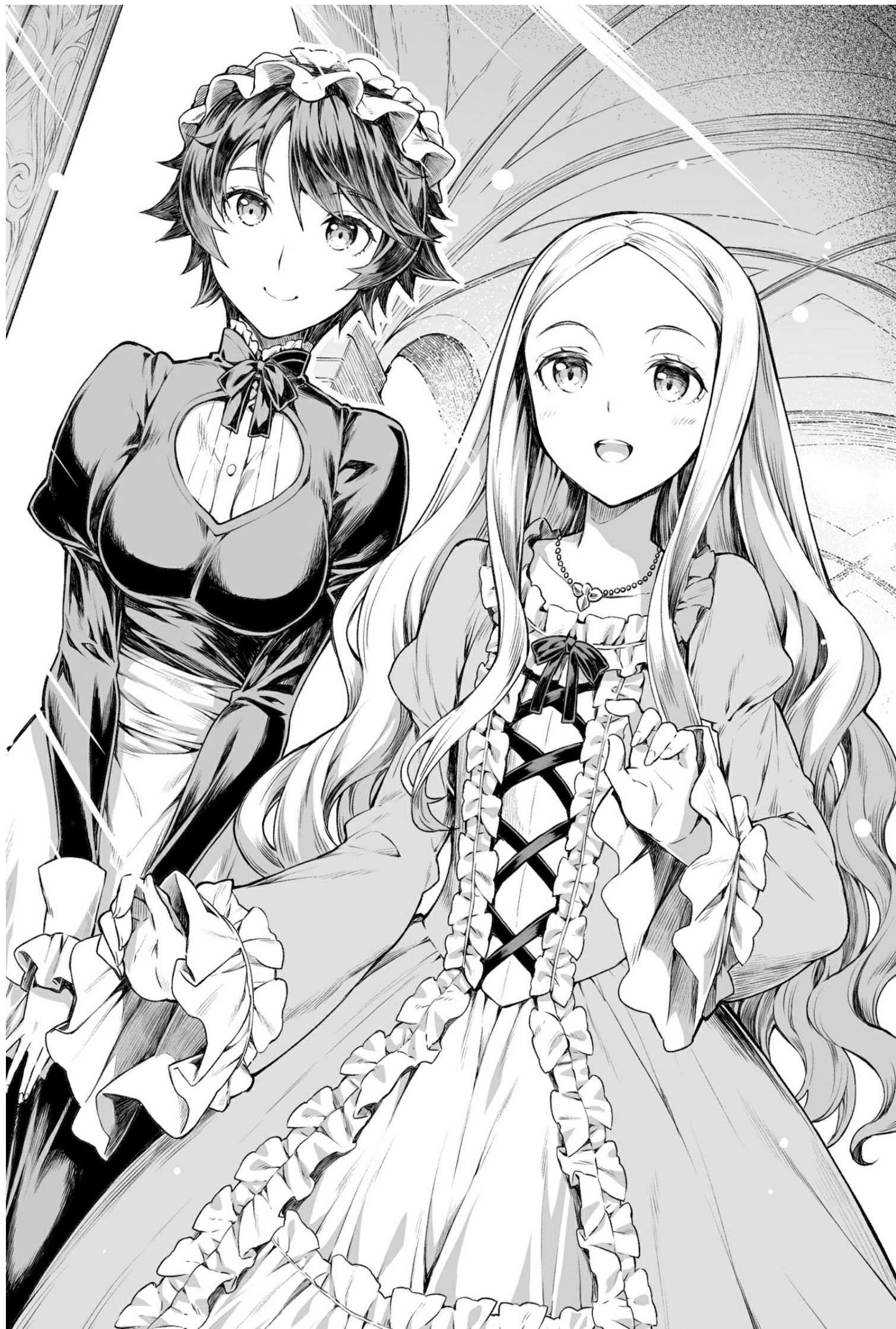
The chambermaid bowed her head. “It's certainly been a while, Arc. I hardly expected to see you here.”

Seeing the way she moved and hearing her voice brought it all back to me. “Oh, wow! Lauren? Rita?”

The girls standing before me were the daughter of Viscount Luvier and her chambermaid. I'd saved them while they were in the middle of being attacked by a group of bandits, shortly after I'd first arrived in this world.

Lauren Laraiya du Luvier spoke next. “It's good to see you again, Arc. I'd like to take this opportunity to thank you once again for saving me.”

I'd left the city of Luvier shortly after my arrival and had never learned what happened with the viscount's daughter. She seemed to be in good spirits.



Though logically I knew it hadn't been all that long ago, it somehow felt like an eternity since we'd last met.

However, I had more pressing questions. Like what they were doing here in the palace, for starters.

"It's great to see that you're both doing well. What brings you here?"

If I recalled correctly, Luvier was located all the way on the other side of the Calcut Mountains, quite a distance from the capital. While the Luvier domain was still a part of the Rhoden Kingdom, it was hardly a trip you'd take lightly if you had to travel by carriage.

Lauren giggled at my question. "The king called all of the nobles here to his palace. Except for the new year's greeting, such an event is quite rare, so I figured I'd join Father for this unique opportunity."

Rita nodded. "Apparently the king is going to make an important proclamation in five days' time. The madam and I have been wandering around the palace to see what we can learn before then."

"Is that so?"

The only reason I could think of for Rhoden's king to issue an order for all the nobles to gather here was so that he could tell them about the treaty the kingdom had entered into following the battle with the Holy Hilk Kingdom.

In the past, nobles throughout the country had abducted and sold elves like property, resulting in a rather touchy relationship with the Great Canada Forest. However, Princess Yuriarna had been making great strides toward improving this.

The treaty added more severe punishments for the already-outlawed behavior pertaining to the elves, and it laid the groundwork for improving relations between elves and humans, in addition to expanding the legislation to include the mountain people as well. The question was whether or not the nobles would so readily give up their slaves.

Then again, there was really no use in me thinking about such things.

Lauren looked up at me with an inquisitive twinkle in her eye. "More

importantly, what brings *you* here, Arc?”

It was a fairly obvious question to ask. When we first met, I’d introduced myself as a wandering mercenary—someone you certainly wouldn’t expect to find walking alone in a palace.

But what could I say to explain this away? Few people even knew about the meeting that was to be held here. Sure, it would eventually be announced, but it hardly seemed right for an elf like myself to go blabbing about it. Best to keep it vague.

“I can’t tell you any details, but I’m here to protect a very important person.”

They seemed satisfied with this answer.

“You’re quite strong. I’m sure there’s no better bodyguard out there.” Lauren offered a praising smile. As I looked at her, the image that had been burned in my mind, of the terrified young girl being attacked by bandits, slowly faded away.

“Kyii?”

While I was focused on the two women standing before me, Ponta gave a curious cry from atop my head.

“Eep!”

“Whoa!”

The sudden movement caught Lauren and Rita off guard. They turned their attention to the top of my helmet.

“Wow, that’s so adorable! I thought it was just a decoration!” Lauren gazed up at Ponta with wide eyes.

Rita looked startled, though she refused to let such unbecoming behavior show in front of her mistress.

“Sorry for scaring you. This little critter is Ponta, my travel companion.”

“Kyii!” Ponta puffed out its chest and gave its tail a proud wag.

Now that the shock had worn off, Rita’s eyes sparkled. She seemed quite smitten by the little cottontailed fox.

Lauren smiled. “Um, Arc, would you like to join us?”

I was thrilled that she offered, but unfortunately I had other plans. It was about time for me to stop by Lahki’s Shoppe in Lamburt and take my supplies, assuming they were ready, back to the temple.

Before I could do that, I would need to head back to the mountain people’s settlement to ask Chiyome to join me again and drive the cart.

“That’s very kind of you, but I’m afraid I have other matters I must attend to.”

The pair looked disappointed, but they tried not to let it show. I got the impression that noblewomen in this world weren’t given many opportunities to socialize outside of the roles that society thrust upon them.

After we parted ways, I made my way to a secluded part of the palace. Once I confirmed I was alone, I used Transport Gate to head to the settlement.

When the darkness faded, I found myself outside the entrance to the mountain people’s village, surrounded by nature in all directions.

It looked like a few more houses had been built since I was here last, though some of them were little more than frames with roofs. They still had a long way to go, but they were making great progress.

I glanced around for Chiyome, but she didn’t seem to be anywhere nearby.

A voice called out from behind me. “You’re early, Arc. Shall we get going?”

“Whoa! Chiyome?!”

“Kyii!”

I spun around, completely caught off guard. She seemed to have appeared out of thin air. Her ears twitched atop her head, and her tail wagged back and forth excitedly. She seemed pleased with my reaction.

Chiyome had recently been training with Glenys—Ariane’s mother and a skilled teacher in the art of combat—to hone her skills in sneaking up on opponents from behind.

I was also training with Glenys, and I was getting pretty decent when wielding a blade, if I said so myself. Not that I held a candle to Chiyome.

“Sorry to bother you.”

“Not at all! I’m actually not all that busy out here. I spend my time cleaning, gutting, and drying fish, harvesting wood, tilling soil. It’s kind of fun, really.”

Chiyome smiled, looking off in the direction of the work site as the hollow sound of a mallet hammering nails echoed through the air.

She’d largely been relieved of her previous duty—sneaking into human cities and rescuing her comrades from slave markets—and had been assigned to watch over the construction of the settlement.

Though one of the most powerful warriors of the Jinshin clan, Chiyome was also the youngest, at a mere fourteen years old.

Now that the battle with the Holy Hilk Kingdom was over, it seemed as if Hanzo had decided to put her into a position more appropriate for her age...and maybe even let her relax.

At least, that was how I interpreted it.

“It’s really nice to see it all coming together.”

Chiyome nodded at this sentiment before shooting me a questioning look. “Where’s Ariane?”

Ariane, who’d practically been tied to my hip for the last I-don’t-know-how-long, hadn’t been around as much lately.

“Glenys sent her on a mission to clear out some monsters lurking near Lalatoya Village. She told me to say hi to you.”

“Oh...I see.”

The young girl seemed less than enthusiastic about this answer. I quickly changed the subject.

“Well, shall we get going?”

Chiyome nodded, and I teleported us back to Lamburt.

Lahki’s Shoppe was just as busy as it had been when I’d requested the lumber. In fact, it might have been my imagination, but I thought it was even busier.

Unlike the large shop next door, Lahki’s was narrow and deep, making the

people flooding in and out all the more obvious. It struck me that the shop might have grown a little *too* fast.

Another new addition were the burly men guards keeping a close watch on the entrance.

I introduced myself to a staff member on the first floor, and they quickly ushered us inside, where I found my cart filled with lumber. It looked like my order had been fulfilled without a hitch.

I made my way to the reception room on the second floor and found Lahki there with a bright smile on his face.

“Thank you for allowing us to be of service to you once again, Arc.” He bowed low and gestured for Chiyome and me to sit.

A woman appeared with glasses of hot tea and snacks.

“Kyii!”

I handed one of the snacks up to Ponta.

Chiyome took one of the glasses from the table and brought it to her mouth, gently blowing on it before taking a sip. Her ears and tail instantly tensed. Apparently, it was still a tad too hot.

I turned my attention to Lahki. “Thank you for taking care of this matter so quickly, despite how busy you are. I just looked at the cart and it appears as if everything is in order. Is that correct?”

Lahki’s smile grew even wider. “Yes, I was able to get everything you asked for. I did my best to stack the wood in such a way that it won’t fall out, but please avoid any sudden bumps or turns.”

Chiyome, my driver, nodded.

“Understood,” I said. “By the way, it seems like things are even busier than last time. What happened?”

Lahki made a face. “Well, the seperis steel you left with me earlier is apparently immensely rare. After talking it over with an acquaintance, he recommended putting it up for auction.”

I'd been aware that seperi steel was considered a precious metal, but it was also difficult to sell, since it was almost impossible to work with. An auction would narrow the bidders to those who knew what to do with it...and fetch the best price in the process.

Lahki ran a hand through his hair. "I trust this acquaintance of mine, so I didn't figure there'd be any problems. But two days after we finished the paperwork to put it on the auction block and get the item appraised, someone broke into the shop."

Chiyome watched his face closely. "So the seperi steel was stolen?"

Lahki vigorously shook his head. "Oh, no, no, no! Your precious item is still safe and sound! No, the guards of another acquaintance of mine managed to catch the thief. But I never even imagined that someone would walk through the front door in the middle of the day to try to steal something. I was completely unprepared." His shoulders slumped.

Chiyome let her gaze drop back down to the tea in front of her. "If they didn't steal anything, what's the problem?"

"I mean, it just wouldn't do for a merchant such as myself to have such weak security...especially when accepting possession of customers' valuable products. My acquaintance really let me have it." Lahki let out a rueful laugh. The regret was clear on his face.

"It sounds like you found good company, then," I said.

Lahki ran a hand through his hair. "You could say that, yes."

"So, you decided to increase your number of guards? I'm really sorry for causing you all this trouble."

I never would have guessed that all the commotion downstairs was due to the item *I'd* left with him.

Lahki shook his head again. "No, no. Like I mentioned, it was a lack of foresight on my part. There's nothing for you to apologize for, Arc. Besides, I want to talk with you about the thief."

He frowned.

“You see, one of the appraisers leaked the fact that seperis steel would be coming to auction. Of course, he’s already been arrested, but when it reached the Lord Petros that *you* were the owner, the auction house was temporarily closed. They’re conducting an investigation to ensure that no other information will be leaked. But this means that I can’t put your item up for auction until it reopens.”

I’d met the lord of Lamburt before, so it made sense that this would draw his attention, but the fact that the thief had a connection to the auction house could cause the entire city to lose faith in local trade.

Petros was an intelligent man, unlike the previous lord, who’d encouraged the slave trade. Under Petros’s leadership, I was confident the city would see immense growth.

“Well, I’m in no hurry. I can tell that it’s been a hassle for you, so by all means, wait for the right time to sell the seperis steel.”

Lahki bowed his head once again.

We returned to the cart and, with Chiyome in the driver’s seat, left Lahki’s Shoppe. We drew a lot of eyes as we left, but I was used to that at this point.

Unfortunately for me, paved roads were still a distant dream in this world, and a jolt ran up my spine every time one of the large wooden wheels rolled over a stone.

We were moving so slowly—to make sure the overloaded cart didn’t topple—that I could have walked faster. The more I thought about this kind of reliance on beasts of burden, the more I realized why armies weren’t able to march long distances in short periods of time. Why, it would take at least a month to get my supplies from Lamburt to the shrine if I’d been stuck relying on nothing but this horse-drawn cart to get me there.

As soon as we left the city limits, we took a path off the main road.

“Your turn, Arc.”

“Right. Transport Gate!”

I felt as if I were weightless for a moment. Then the familiar shrine came into

focus in front of me, and I hopped off the cart.

“Kyii!”

Ponta took off toward the shrubs, probably looking for Shiden.

“Sorry about that, Chiyome.”

Chiyome waved a dismissive hand. “Not at all. Feel free to call upon me anytime.”

“I guess we should head back to the village to pick up the craftspeople, eh?”

“Let’s.”

Since Ponta had left to play with Shiden, I figured I could leave the cottontailed fox to its own devices. After releasing the horses from the cart, I teleported us back to the village.

Chiyome and I parted ways at the new settlement. I returned to the shrine with the craftspeople and their helpers. Just as they were about to begin working, one of the older men turned to me.

“We’ll get started on that roof now, Arc. But would you mind stopping by the village from time to time to pick us up some grub? This is gonna take a while.”

“That’s absolutely not a problem.”

Stopping to gather and cook food would greatly slow them down, so they’d already made arrangements to have meals prepared for them back in the village. I was more than happy to help.

The old man headed off to join the others. I gazed upward, relieved to finally be done for the day.

The sun was still high in the sky. It couldn’t have been much later than noon. Chiyome was helping out around the village, Ariane was carrying out her elven duties, and Ponta was playing with Shiden. That left me free to get lunch by myself. The only question was...where to eat?

“Hmm... this definitely isn’t an easy decision.”

I’d eaten quite a few dishes in a variety of places since coming to this world. But one memory definitely stood out.

I cast Transport Gate and found myself standing in the middle of an expansive field of grain a moment later. Up ahead was a town surrounded by a large ditch.

Beside the town gate stood a watchtower filled with several guards.

“Wow. It’s sure been a while.”

A gentle wind rolled across the field of green, like a gently crashing wave.

I was standing outside Luvierite—the first town I’d ever visited in this world. Even with the viscount off in the capital, the town positively bustled.

I walked across the stone bridge, showed my travel pass to the guard, and was waved inside, where I was greeted by stall upon stall lining either side of the main road.

Each of the vendors brought with them a different memory—the leather waterskin I still used daily, the hemp bag I carried with me, and so on.

I walked through the food vendors for a bit before stopping at my objective.

“One of your best, kind sir.”

“Of course!”

The man handed me some smoked rabbit wrapped in a large leaf, and I dropped two copper coins into his hand.

With my lunch secured, I started to wander the stalls. I decided to pick up some dried nuts as a gift for Ponta.

I recalled how I’d gotten my mercenary license out here. How was that bear of a man at reception doing?

I let my mind wander as I walked the streets of Luvierite, only to find myself at the edge of town. It was a whole lot smaller than the capital, though I personally enjoyed the more relaxed atmosphere here.

However, something about the sight of Lauren when I’d run into her told me this town would soon be growing. I couldn’t point to any specific reason, but I knew it to be true.

“Well, I guess I’m about done here.”

I exited the east gate and followed one of the footpaths running between the

fields north, along the city wall. Whenever a farmer caught sight of me, they immediately bowed before hurrying away.

It was a familiar experience, since it happened every time I went out in my armor.

I probably looked like some sort of villainous soldier out for trouble. They were just trying not to draw any attention to themselves. I turned onto a mostly deserted trail, pulled out the smoked rabbit, and began munching as I walked.

It was quite salty, and the smoked herbs nearly overpowered my senses, but it was absolutely delicious. I let out a long sigh after swallowing my first bite.

“Mmm, that’s amazing.”

It wasn’t the fare you’d expect from a five-star restaurant, but it was the kind of delicious grub you’d want after a hard day of labor. In a matter of moments, I’d devoured the entire rabbit.

Glancing back over my shoulder, I saw the tiny outline of Luvier on the horizon. I must’ve been pretty lost in thought to come so far without realizing.

“Well, let’s keep going a bit further.”

I cast Transport Gate again, this time heading to a village I hadn’t seen in quite a long time. The world went dark, then opened back up to a small tranquil village.

The fields outside the village were surrounded by ditches and wooden fences. The village itself had a dense earthen wall around it, with a large wooden gate. This was Rata, a village I’d visited on my first mercenary assignment.

The last time I was here, the gate had been guarded by two old men, but this time, there was only one...and he had his back to me. He seemed like a pretty terrible guard.

The old man finally noticed me as I walked past him.

“A knight?! You...you aren’t by chance the same knight who came here before, are you?”

He looked at me with wide eyes. At least he seemed to remember my previous visit. That was good, since it meant I wouldn’t need to explain

everything all over again. My gaudy armor had its uses.

“I’m glad to see you’re in good health, fine sir.”

I offered a quick wave before turning my attention back to the village, where he’d been gazing just moments before.

All of the villagers were gathered in the village square with their hands held together in prayer. They seemed to be chanting something.

From time to time, I caught the sound of someone sobbing.

It looked like...

“Excuse me, sir, but what happened here?”

The old man confirmed my fears, his voice heavy with sadness. “Two children recently succumbed to an illness.”

So this was a funeral.

The only children I knew in this town were Marca, the girl who’d called me here in the first place, and her younger sister, Herina.

“It...wasn’t Marca, was it?” My voice was rough as I forced the words out of my throat.

The man blinked once before a gentle smile graced his face. He shook his head. “Ah, no. Marca, Herina, and their mother are all fine. These two were much younger, around four and six. It’s hardly a rare occurrence, unfortunately.”

The man turned back toward the funeral and brought his hands up in prayer.

Four and six...

“Is there some kind of disease running through the village?”

The man shook his head again. “Just a run-of-the-mill cough.”

“A cough?”

“Right. When adults catch it, we go to bed early and it’s gone before we know it.”

It sounded like he was describing a common cold.

I gestured to the funeral. “Does this happen often?”

“Hmm, I s’pose so.”

From the way he said this, it sounded like quite a few children had been lost already.

“Medicine is so expensive, you see. People like us can hardly afford it.”

Making matters worse, if the village had a poor harvest, they’d have to eat less and less nutritious food, leading to a weaker population even *more* likely to succumb to the illness.

“Thanks to you, Sir Knight, since you brought that fang boar to us, we shouldn’t want for food for some time.” He sighed. “If only that older one could’ve held out another year, they would’ve been offered the divine protection of the spirits.”

“I’m sorry?” Divine protection sounded like something out of a fantasy novel.

The old man’s eyes were sad. “They call it the second birth.”

This was the first time I’d heard of such a thing.

The man explained. “The first time you’re born, it’s from your mother’s womb. The second time is when you receive the divine protection of the spirits and the right to live here in the world. Until you receive the divine protection... Well, this can happen.”

I finally understood what he meant. In a world without a proper understanding of medical science, the death rate for children was alarmingly high. Nearly half of them would die before reaching adulthood.

Now that I thought about it, the sisters I’d saved from the undead back in the holy capital had been around Marca and Herina’s age. If children received the divine protection of the spirits at the age of seven, that meant the younger one wasn’t out of the woods yet.

I could only imagine how hard it must have been on the girls, both physically and mentally, to live in that refugee camp. But was there anything I could do?

The face of another young woman appeared in my mind. It was that of Lauren, the daughter of the viscount of Luvier.

“Maybe I’m only doing it to feel good about myself,” I mumbled, “but that’s better than doing nothing at all.”

The old man gave me a confused look.

“Excuse me, sir. Are there enough people here in Rata to perform all the necessary village work?”

He thought it over. “Well, no, of course not. We’re always shorthanded out here.”

It was clear he had no idea why I’d asked him this.

“I see. Anyway, I’d best be going.”

I began to walk away.

The man called out after me. “Sir Knight? You’re leaving so soon?”

As far as he knew, I’d spent the time to come all the way out to his village, stood at the entrance, and then immediately left. It was a pretty bizarre sight, to be sure.

I stopped, reached into my bag, and pulled out five gold coins. I walked back and pressed the coins firmly into the man’s palm.

“Please give this to the suffering family, along with my condolences.”

Before he had a chance to reply, I started off again, ignoring the man’s calls. Only once I was far enough from the village did I stop and turn around to look back at the village one last time before using my Transport Gate to teleport to the capital city of Olav.

Later that night, I returned to Lalatoya and met up with Ariane after she’d finished with her patrol for the day. Before we could properly catch up, Dillan pulled us aside.

“I have something important to discuss with you. Would you fetch Chiyome as well?”

I nodded.

“Thank you, Arc.” Dillan hurried off in the direction of his house.

I summoned up Transport Gate. A short while later, Ariane, Chiyome, and I

were all back in Lalatoya.

“Kyii! Kyii!”

Dillan hadn’t asked me to bring Ponta, but I’d stopped by the shrine all the same. Ponta was in a bad mood when I first arrived, given how late I was, but the snack I’d bought it had changed its tune.

“What were you so busy doing today, Arc?”

I turned to Ariane. She sounded just like a mother harping on a young child.

She’d taken a bath after her patrol, and her amethyst skin was practically glowing. I averted my gaze and thought back on my day.

“I did quite a bit, actually. I needed to pick up the lumber for my roof. Then I visited some places I hadn’t been to in a while.” I kept it brief.

“Hunh.” Ariane leaned in close, looking me over from head to toe. “I sense you were close to a woman today.”

Chiyome began to sniff the air around me. “It’s faint, but I detect the scent of perfume.”

Under the pressure of such intense scrutiny, I took a step backward.

I’d met with *two* women today, but we’d only spoken briefly. How could they pick up on such little contact?

I mean, sure, Chiyome had a keen sense of smell, but I’d never heard anything about dark elves having superhuman senses.

“I ran into a woman I once saved from a pack of bandits. According to her, King Karlon summoned all nobles to the capital.”

Chiyome’s ears twitched at this. “Maybe he plans to announce the details of the treaty?”

“That’s what I would assume. He’ll need to impress upon the nobles the need to improve their relationship with the elves and mountain people.”

We made our way to Ariane’s house, where we caught a whiff of whatever Glenys was cooking for dinner. The smell instantly reminded me of how hungry I was.

On the second floor, Glenys greeted us with a warm smile. “Welcome back. Once you’re done speaking with Dillan, we can all sit down for dinner. I fully expect you to eat with us, Chiyome. You can even stay here for the night, if you’d like.”

Chiyome bowed low at the kind offer. “Th-thank you!”

“Kyiiii!” Ponta was completely intoxicated by the delectable scent and wagged its tail around hungrily.

Not to be outdone by Ponta’s wail, the loud grumble of someone’s stomach sounded from the kitchen. Chiyome and I exchanged a curious glance. Before I could say anything, Ariane started aggressively shoving me along.

“Hurry up! You can’t keep a village elder waiting around for you all day, you know!”

Her ears were flushed ever so slightly pink as she urged me through the doorway and into the next room.

It was the first time I’d ever been in this particular room. It looked like it was used for receiving guests and was furnished with a beautiful wooden table, a gorgeous sofa, and a chair in which Dillan sat.

“Apologies for dragging you into a meeting right after you got back, Arc and Chiyome.”

I waved my hand to indicate that it was no big deal. “Lalatoya has done so much for me. The least I can do is rush over when summoned.”

Chiyome nodded in agreement with my sentiment.

Dillan let a gentle laugh escape his lips. “I’ve lost count of how many times you two have come to my aid, but I can’t for the life of me recall ever doing the same. Be that as it may, why don’t you sit down?” A concerned expression washed over his face. Once everyone was seated, he continued. “So, shall we discuss why I called you all here?”

He reached into his robe and pulled out a familiar gem.

Deep within the faintly glowing crystal, I could see extremely detailed magical runes. I’d found this gem in the treasury of the central cathedral of the Holy Hilk

Kingdom's capital.

At the time, all I knew was that it seemed to be magical, so I'd given it to Dillan in the hopes that a magic researcher or artisan in Maple might be able to analyze it.

"Were you able to find out what kind of magical effects it has?" I asked.

Ariane and Chiyome also looked eagerly toward Dillan.

"It took some time to read the runes, but yes, we managed to figure it out." He rolled the gem in his hand as he spoke, causing the symbols within to flash and sparkle in the light.

"Kyii, kyiiiiiii!" Ponta stood on its hind legs and batted its paws in the direction of Dillan's hand, as if drawn in by the hypnotic prism.

Ariane grabbed Ponta and placed the cottontailed fox in her lap.

"Kyii..."

"To make a long story short, this crystal allows those who wield it to use teleportation magic."



Ariane, Chiyome, and I all looked at the gem in shock.

“Are you sure about that?” I asked

He frowned, shrugging slightly. “I’m not a researcher myself, so I can’t say if what they told me is accurate or not without testing it. Apparently, this is what’s known as a teleportation gem or teleportation stone. In any case, it can only be used once. In the right hands, it’s invaluable, and yet so fragile.”

He set the teleportation stone on the table.

“It seems awfully costly for a one-time-use item. Maybe it’s meant for emergencies?”

Ariane furrowed her brow as she gazed intently at the gem.

The teleportation pads that connected all of the major villages of the Great Canada Forest were magical items created by the founding elder that relied on a fixed dais running off of rune stones. This teleportation stone, however, could only be used once before it was gone forever.

There were no living elves capable of making new teleportation pads, so the very idea of a disposable item for something as precious as teleportation magic seemed absurd.

In the game, however, one-time-use items that teleported you around the map were hardly rare. In fact, with the right class, you could even make them on your own.

Since the pontiff and I came from the same world, it seemed entirely possible that he’d either brought these consumable items with him or was able to create them on his own. Given that I’d shown up here with nothing but my equipment, the latter of the two possibilities seemed far more likely.

Which meant...

“Assuming these stones *are* for emergencies,” Ariane said, “the missing cardinals very likely used them to flee the Holy Hilk Kingdom.”

Chiyome glowered down at the teleportation stone in response to this theory.

Dillan agreed with his daughter’s assessment. “That seems highly likely.”

“Where do these teleportation stones take you?” I asked

Dillan shook his head. As I’d half-expected, there was no way of knowing until you used it. Not only that, but the moment you used the teleportation stone, it would be destroyed. You’d have no way of coming back.

The concept was so terrifying that the stone really couldn’t be used. At least not by most people.

“So if we use the teleportation stone,” I said, “we might find some clues as to where the cardinals ran off to. On the other hand, getting back would be no small feat. Our problem would be solved if we knew someone who could teleport back here after using the stone.”

Dillan smiled. “I think we have no choice but to ask for your assistance in this matter.”

Ariane stuck her tongue out at me. “That’s right. Even if Arc ends up in the middle of a dragon roost, I’m sure he’ll make it back just fine.”

“Even I would be completely terrified to end up in a place like that!” I protested.

Seeing my response to Ariane’s teasing, Chiyome joined in as well. “And the fact that being terrified is the worst thing that would happen is what makes you so great, Arc. Most people would die.” Her tail wagged cheerfully behind her.

“Kyii! Kyii!” I couldn’t tell if Ponta was trying to cheer me up or joining in the teasing.

I was sure that Ariane and Chiyome were *more* than capable enough to get out of a dragon’s roost on their own, but I decided to not push the point.

I took the teleportation stone from the table and held it up to the light. It wasn’t nearly as heavy as I’d expected. I could probably crush it in my fist if I tried.

I looked back up at Dillan.

“During our battle with the Hilk, the humans, elves, and mountain people learned of the danger presented by the cardinals. As long as they’re out there, unaccounted for, they pose a threat. Arc, I would like to ask for your assistance

once more, in order to put our war with the Hilk to rest for good.”

Seeing how serious Dillan was, I sat up straighter in my seat. “I understand. There is nothing more important to the future of the continent than to eliminate the threats that face us.”

Right as I was in the middle of accepting Dillan’s task, I heard another oddly adorable growl, like that of an empty stomach. My eyes fell on Ariane, but she shook her head aggressively in denial.

“Whoa, hey! That wasn’t me!”

The grumbling stomach erupted again, and Ponta let out a long, sad mew from where it sat in Ariane’s lap. “Kyiiiiiii...”

Apparently, Ponta was the culprit.

“You can’t fight on an empty stomach,” I said.

Dillan nodded. “You’re absolutely right. Why don’t we end the conversation here and head back to the kitchen, eh?”

Ariane needed no further prompting. She quickly made her way to the door, clutching Ponta to her chest.

“Now, what do you think Mom made for dinner, my sweet little Poooooonta...?” Her voice was muffled as she buried her face in the fox’s soft fur.

“I would like to join you, if I may,” Chiyome said.

“No need to be so humble,” Dillan replied. “After all, I called you here in the first place.”

Chiyome and Dillan followed Ariane out of the room.

Realizing I was still holding the teleportation stone, I rushed to put it back on the table, causing the runes to glow deep within its core.

Would this really provide us a hint as to where the cardinals had run off to?

There was something both beautiful and ominous about the faint light coming off of the gem.

Intermission: A Difference of Opinion

OUTFITTED IN GLEAMING silver armor etched with white-and-azure markings—which put even the king’s bodyguards to shame—and suited up with a sword as long as he was tall along with a rune-inscribed shield and a black cape that fluttered in the breeze, the knight struck an impressive figure as he walked the stone hallways of the palace. He looked like a figure straight from the legends.

The first time they’d met, he’d introduced himself as a wayward traveler named Arc.

Lauren Laraiya du Luvier had been on her way home from a dinner party in a neighboring city. She could still remember every little detail of that day.

They’d been attacked by a group of bandits, and her guards had fallen one after the next, until only she and Rita were left. That was when *he* had appeared on the scene.

The six bandits fell in the blink of an eye, and he called out to Lauren, the concern evident in his soft voice. She felt as if she were a character in a fairy tale or watching a stage play unfold.

He had left just as quickly as he’d come, and she never had the chance to properly thank him.

Sometime later, the king summoned all land-owning nobles throughout the land to the capital, and Lauren joined her father, Viscount Luvier, on the journey.

It would take quite a while for all of the nobles to make it to the capital. Fortunately for Lauren and her father, the Luvier domain was connected to the capital by a large road that allowed them to travel by horse-drawn carriage, stopping in neighboring lands along the way. Not all nobles were so lucky.

Upon their arrival, Lauren and her chambermaid, Rita, were completely taken in by the sheer brilliance of the capital. As they were still early, the two young

women decided to spend some time looking around. That was when they ran across the familiar silver knight.

The part of the palace where the king resided was split into several different sections, though nobles had few restrictions put on their access and could go practically anywhere they pleased.

In any case, they were still able to see parts of the palace that normal citizens would never in their wildest dreams have an opportunity to lay eyes on, shy of some sort of special occasion or event.

It was all perfectly safe. No one other than the king's bodyguards, palace guards, and knights serving as protection for foreign dignitaries were allowed to carry weapons within the palace. And yet...here was the silver knight, right in the middle of the palace, wearing his massive blade.

Lauren began to wonder if the story he'd told her about being a wayward traveler had been a lie. There was no other reason why he would be in the palace, a place most commoners could never even set foot. But then...who was he?

Several questions all began to run through her mind all at once, but before she had time to think them through, her body had already reacted and she was jogging after him.

"Arc? Aaarc! Aaaaarc?!"

He turned around, looking puzzled.

Lauren felt her knees go light as she was overcome with emotion. It was almost too much to bear that he might forget such a pivotal moment in her life, short though it had been.

She struggled to find the right words. "It's certainly been a while, Arc. I hardly expected to see you here."

Rita stepped up and properly greeted Arc in Lauren's place. Something seemed to click, and he instantly recognized the young women. It was clear by the tone of his voice just how surprised he was to see them.

"Oh, wow! Lauren? Rita?"

Lauren's face instantly lit up. Just moments ago, she'd felt as if she were standing on a precipice. Now she found herself in a field of wildflowers. She was embarrassed by just how happy this made her.

"It's good to see you again, Arc. I'd like to take this opportunity to thank you once again for saving me."

After what felt like an eternity, she was finally able to get the words out. It felt great, like unloading a massive burden from her chest. But she also wanted to know what he was doing here in the first place.

He beat her to the punch. "It's great to see that you're both doing so well. What brings you here?"

This was the very same question she'd wanted to pose to him.

It seemed so unreal that they'd be reunited in the palace of all places. Just thinking about it brought a smile to Lauren's lips.

She explained how they'd been summoned to the capital by the king. Rita filled in details where she could. Arc stayed silent the entire time. Once they finished, he nodded.

It was impossible to gauge his facial expression through his helmet, but Lauren got the impression that he already knew something about the king's summons.

From his brilliant armor and the fact that he was allowed to keep his sword, she figured he must be the guard of some royal dignitary. She initially considered he might be with the Great West Revlon Empire—a place which Prince Sekt was known to have connections—but that didn't seem right either.

Arc had returned to Luvierter once before and had asked Rita the way to the empire. Obviously, there would have been no reason for a person who'd just come from there to ask about the route back...unless he really was that lost.

In any case, Lauren decided to ask the same of him.

"More importantly, what brings *you* here Arc?"

Arc fell silent for a moment. "I can't tell you any details, but I'm here to protect a very important person."

Lauren had expected him to say something to that effect. However, the fact that he'd neglected to mention who it was suggested that there must be some other unannounced guests in the palace.

"You're quite strong. I'm sure there's no better bodyguard out there."

She had seen with her very own eyes just how powerful he was. Even the king's bodyguards wouldn't stand a chance against him. She would love to know just what type of person could retain someone so powerful for their own personal protection.

Arc truly was a man of many mysteries.

Despite his flashy armor, Lauren had gotten the impression—through the reports she'd received of him registering for mercenary work—that he was in desperate need of money. Putting all of this together, the only thing that made sense was if he was a noble who'd been disgraced and had lost everything.

But if he was in need of funds, then why would he leave town before the viscount could properly reward him for saving her?

Since she couldn't come up with a logical answer to that question, it must mean that one or more of her presumptions were wrong.

While she was standing there, quietly thinking over the possibilities, Arc leaned toward her. She could feel his gaze on her, but she couldn't see anything in the dark depths of his helmet.

All of a sudden, the decoration atop his helmet began to stir.

"Kyii?"

Lauren and Rita both screamed in surprise.

"Eep!"

"Whoa!"

Looking closer, Lauren realized that the green fur lining the top of his helmet *wasn't* a decoration but a small creature. It was unlike anything she'd ever seen before.

She glanced over at Rita, who was well known for her love of animals, to find

her chambermaid staring intently at the creature.

Arc quickly introduced the critter as Ponta, his travel companion.

Lauren didn't recall seeing the creature when they'd first met, but she also hadn't been particularly lucid following the assault, so she might have missed it.

She wanted to know more about Ponta, but it was unbecoming of a noble's daughter to be so direct. Instead, she decided to invite Arc to join them on their tour of the palace.

"Um, Arc, would you like to join us?"

Much to her surprise, he straightened back up and declined. "That's very kind of you, but I'm afraid I have other matters I must attend to."

He spun on his heel, sending his black cape flying into the air behind him, before walking off.

Rita turned to look at Lauren. "He certainly seems busy."

Lauren nodded as she watched the shrinking figure in the distance. She let out a long sigh. "I got to properly thank him, I guess, but I didn't get to say much beyond that."

Part of her interest in Arc was mere curiosity, but it was more than that. She had her reasons for asking her father to let her come all the way out to the capital with him.

"Excuse me, but do you know that man?"

A mysterious voice called out from behind the two women. Lauren and Rita turned. A short ways off, they spotted a young man slowly approaching them.

He was tall with blond hair, blue eyes, and an attractive face. Though they'd never met in person before, Lauren instantly recognized the man and curtsied. Rita immediately followed her mistress's cue and took a step back.

The man was dressed in the finest of clothes, accented by glimmering jewels. Most notable, however, were the accessories he carried with him, all of which were marked with the royal crest of the Rhoden family.

Lauren smiled. "It's an honor to meet you, Prince Sect."

The prince waved his hand, as if to dismiss her formal greeting. “No need for such pleasantries. Do you know him or not?”

He was quick to return to his original question, which surprised Lauren.

Everything she’d heard about Prince Sekt suggested he was a man who prized hierarchy and maintained class differences. This seemed to be completely at odds with the man standing before her.

“If you’re talking about Arc, then yes, I do.”

Sekt’s eyes lit up. “I’m surprised to hear that our fine nation also has a connection with him. May I ask how you became acquainted?”

“I was attacked by bandits on my way home from an evening banquet. Arc saved me.”

This answer seemed to surprise him. “There are bandits who would dare to attack a noble’s carriage within our borders?” He blinked as if just realizing something. “I’m sorry, I didn’t catch your name.”

Lauren curtsied again. “My name is Lauren Laraiya, daughter of Viscount Buckle du Luvier. It is truly an honor.”

Sekt frowned. “Luvier, you said? Your family has been quite generous in sending gifts to my father.”

Lauren’s father had already told her all about this. There had been a powerful monster on the loose in their domain, and the viscount had sent his soldiers to put an end to it. After slaying the beast, they’d harvested all the valuable parts and sent them to the king as a gift.

Even more importantly, Viscount Luvier was one of Sekt’s supporters.

“Your words are too kind for the likes of me. But I’m certain Father will be happy to know that you remember him.” Lauren smiled and bowed her head.

Prince Sekt turned his attention back down the hall, in the direction Arc had disappeared. “Miss Lauren, I’m going to ask you one more time. Do you *know* that man?”

“Huh?”

She looked at him in confusion. The question implied that the prince *didn't* know who Arc was and was hoping to learn more about him. Lauren considered for a moment that perhaps Arc was being purposefully hidden from the royal family, but she decided that she knew too little about the situation to do anything more than answer the question truthfully.

“No, not really. He left shortly after the encounter with the bandits, before I even had a chance to thank him properly. This is the second time we’ve crossed paths. He mentioned that he was the bodyguard for someone important, so I just assumed he was a knight from the Great West Revlon Empire. Is that wrong?”

Prince Sekt raised an eyebrow. “And what makes you think that?”

Lauren felt her heart begin to race.

It was an open secret among the noble class that the two princes had received support from the two empires, but it was something no one spoke of openly...much less to the surviving prince.

Sekt smirked at her reaction. “Unfortunately, he is *not* a knight of the western empire. Nor is he even human, for that matter. He’s an elf from the Great Canada Forest.”

Lauren and Rita were both taken by complete surprise at his revelation.

They were, of course, familiar with elves on a basic level, but everything about Arc seemed completely at odds with what they knew of them. Still, it would explain away a lot of Lauren’s lingering questions.

Elven warriors were known for their unmatched skill on the battlefield, along with their talent for magic. It was said that even the best and most highly trained humans could barely hold their own against one.

Prince Sekt continued. “May I ask *when* he helped you with that bandit problem?”

Still trying to organize her thoughts about Arc’s origin, Lauren rattled off the timeline as best she could remember.

Sekt snorted. “I see. So he was already in the country at that time.”

Lauren could only watch in confusion as he mumbled to himself.

The prince cleared his throat and changed the subject. “I trust you haven’t heard any stories of nobles being involved in the kidnapping of elves, have you?”

This question was of particular interest to Lauren.

Diento, one of several territories sharing a border with Luvier, had up until recently been run by Marquis Diento himself. A short time ago, royal forces had descended upon the territory and seized control, putting Diento under the rule of the royal family.

At the time, many nobles had lodged complaints over such a heavy-handed attack on one of their own.

The Rhoden Kingdom consisted of lands owned by the royal family but ruled by other nobles. They were all constantly engaged in a bitter struggle as they vied for power. In other words, the royal family needed the nobles. Deposing one of them made it seem like they only wanted to increase their power base, even if it meant sacrificing allies in the process.

Making matters worse, the marquis was a very influential man. The fact that the royal family could take his lands with so little regard was cause for concern.

The official reason for this was that Marquis Diento had been abducting elves. Had this been announced by Prince Sekt, it was likely that the nobles would have been suspicious about the royal family’s true intentions, but since it had come from Princess Yuriarna, who was pushing for improved relations between the elves and the humans, this lent the story more credence.

While the royal family had taken the lead in brokering a trade agreement with the elves, it was the nobles who had the most to gain if they could finally get their hands on cultivation rune stones. So they were hardly in a position to lodge formal complaints against the royal family.

Since Luvier shared a border with Diento, additional unannounced information had also made its way across the border.

Officially, the story was that Marquis Diento had been removed from power and executed, but in reality, the marquis had been dead before any of this took

place. This information wasn't exactly a secret. The people of Diento spoke of these rumors openly. Anyone traveling through town would certainly have heard them.

"My father said that the marquis was attacked by elven soldiers who'd come to save their kidnapped comrades. They destroyed his entire manor." Lauren stopped there and looked off into the distance, as if she'd just come to an important realization.

Prince Sekt smirked again. "You are correct in your thinking, Miss Lauren. We believe that Arc was one of the elves who assaulted Diento. He was in Luvier to scout out the surrounding lands."

Lauren frowned. Sekt's theory would answer a lot of her outstanding questions. Arc wore such glamorous armor, and yet he never showed his face nor spoke of his background. It also helped explain why he didn't have any money from Rhoden.

"He must be quite a nice guy to go out of his way and help a noble's daughter while on a scouting mission." Prince Sekt chuckled to himself.

Arc had saved the life of a human, an enemy in a way, while preparing to rescue his comrades who'd been abducted by the very same people.

"Regardless of Arc's motives, it doesn't change how grateful I am to him for saving me." Lauren spoke with conviction.

Sekt smiled down at the young woman. "I must say, Miss Lauren, you and my sister have a lot in common."

Lauren's eyes widened.

"Why do you look so surprised? No need to worry about being polite. Just tell me what you were thinking." His lips turned up into a sly, almost teasing grin.

After a few tense moments, Lauren resolved to speak her mind. "You... You hate your sister, don't you?"

She'd heard just how poor the relationship between Sekt and Yuriarna was. And ever since Yuriarna had successfully brokered a trade deal with the elves, she'd gone from the least likely candidate for succession to the next in line for

the throne.

But Lauren sensed none of that when Sekt had mentioned his sister.

The prince forced a smile. “My, you’re certainly a direct one. No, I don’t hate Yuriarna. But I suppose I don’t particularly care for her either.” He shrugged his shoulders and sighed. “Everyone talks about this fight for succession, but I’m not even interested in being king.”

Sekt’s confession took Lauren by surprise.

“I would want to be the king of a country so powerful that it never needs to worry about foreign invasion. But Yuriarna is creating an entirely different type of nation.”

“Foreign...invasion?”

Lauren cocked her head to the side.

The Rhoden Kingdom had been spared the pain of an invasion from foreign powers for many generations. The only threats they had to face these days were those posed by roaming monsters.

But the way Sekt saw it, the safety you enjoyed today was no assurance about what awaited you tomorrow. Seeing the aftermath of the Holy Hilk Kingdom’s invasion of its neighbors only hardened that belief.

The Holy East Revlon Empire seemed capable of committing acts just as atrocious, if not worse, than the Hilk.

“Do you know what kind of place the eastern empire is, Miss Lauren?”

This question caught her by surprise. She shook her head. “N-no, I don’t. I know that we share a border with them, but that’s just a line on a map. In reality, they’re quite far from us, and the only information we receive is from the border towns. But there’s been an increase in monster activity along the border lately, so even that’s been cut off.”

This was as much as she knew. Until recently, she’d been completely uninterested in politics. But the bandit attack had changed all that. In fact, soon after, Viscount Luvier had sent soldiers out to learn more about who’d attacked his daughter and why. Lauren began to hear rumors that another

noble might have been pulling the strings. This made her want to learn even more. After all, someone she'd previously known absolutely nothing about had put her life in danger.

She'd joined her father on this trip to try to expand her horizons.

Sensing her inner turmoil, Sekt pressed the point. "I imagine there are few nobles who understand the machinations of the eastern empire, or that the emperor has seized control of all troops within his domain. Do you realize the implications of that?"

This, Lauren could answer. "If the emperor controls all the troops, then that means no one in the empire, nobility or otherwise, can stand against him. Right?"

Sekt nodded. "That's correct. If the emperor were to give the order to invade a neighboring nation, the army would mobilize right away. Do you think we could move with the same haste?"

Lauren shook her head. Each of the lords in the Rhoden Kingdom maintained their own armies, as did the royal family. Were the king to try to muster all the nation's troops, each of the nobles would command their own soldiers. Assuming they even responded to the call, which was in itself unlikely.

Those living on the far side of the country would likely refuse, on the grounds that moving their troops such a long way came at an exorbitant cost. And those who disapproved of the king's decision would simply balk at the request.

The royal forces were superior in both number and training to any of those owned by the other nobles, but they would still be woefully insufficient if they had to face off against the rest of Rhoden's nobility...let alone the imperial army.

Though not impossible, it was unrealistic to mobilize all military forces in Rhoden—a problem the Holy East Revlon Empire didn't have.

"The eastern empire's greatest enemy, the western empire, operates in a system very similar to ours, though obviously on a very different scale. Were the eastern empire to attack its enemy to the west, it would easily have the advantage. One by one, individual states would fall as the lords in the capital

debated over the best course of action...until the threat was right on its doorstep.”

“Was that your reason for aligning with the western empire?” Lauren asked. “Because you believe the northern continent will soon become embroiled in a massive war?”

If he felt that the eastern empire posed an existential threat, then perhaps he thought it best to join forces with the only ally that could stand against them. Maybe he’d been trying to avoid conflict all along.

Sekt let out a self-deprecating laugh and dodged her question. “Well, that’s no longer necessary now.”

Lauren frowned, puzzled by his response. “What do you mean by that?”

“There will be an announcement shortly, but Yuriarna has entered into a new treaty with the elves and beast people. The Nohzan Kingdom is also a signatory.”

The revelation stunned Lauren, though Sekt spoke of it as if it were nothing of note. She grew even more surprised as he detailed what the treaty entailed.

In addition to serving as a pact of mutual nonaggression for all signatories, the treaty also immediately set free all enslaved beast people and ensured their rights and liberties by prohibiting acts such as unjust imprisonment and the buying or selling of slaves. Considering the large number of nobles who enslaved beast people, Lauren could easily imagine the resistance the king would face.

Fortunately, this wasn’t much of a problem for Luvier, as there were relatively few enslaved beast people there. But some of the larger domains, with massive labor needs to run their farming operations, would have a large number of slaves. This meant that there would be a great deal of pushback against the treaty from the nobles of those domains, possibly leading to a rift between them and the king.

Lauren’s voice trembled as she struggled to find the right words. “I... there’s no way the nobles will agree to such drastic terms without protest.”

Sekt laughed darkly. “That’s right.”

It was clear from his expression that he was already well aware of what was about to happen. Princess Yuriarna, the one who'd proposed the treaty in the first place, had to know as well.

"Will you use the cultivation rune stones as bartering chips?"

Sekt let out a low, sly chuckle. "Yuriarna will certainly give it a try, but anyone who takes a stand against the treaty will likely see the elves as their enemy."

On the other hand, the royal family and the elves together would have more than enough power to expel anyone who disagreed with the terms of the treaty. Perhaps the royal family was even hoping that some nobles might object, in order to give them an excuse to root them out.

But something still nagged at Lauren. "Why are you telling me all this?"

Sekt shrugged. "Consider it a gift in return for your father's charity. It's up to you whether you keep it to yourself or pass it on. But I'll leave you with a warning. I pray that you never do anything to cross that man."

Prince Sekt spun on his heel and marched off down the hall.

As Lauren watched him grow smaller and smaller, Rita spoke up from behind her, the worry clear in her voice. "What do you think about all that?"

"We should ask Father what to do. We don't want to add any more fuel to the fire of resistance."

Lauren and Rita turned in the opposite direction that Prince Sekt had gone and hurried to Viscount Luvier's quarters.

Epilogue

VITTELVARLAY, the capital of the Great West Revlon Empire, was located in the middle of its territory, which ran along the northwestern reaches of the northern continent.

Long before the empire had split in two, back in the days of a unified Revlon, Vittelvarlay had served as the capital city. Much of its ancient glamor still remained.

At the center of the capital sat the majestic Diyonborhg royal palace, so large that it could be considered a small city in its own right.

A variety of buildings had been constructed on the palace grounds to serve various functions as needed, though access was limited to the select few to whom the emperor had granted permission. In one of these buildings was a small, sparsely decorated room, a space that seemed at odds with the palace nearby.

Its walls were much thicker than those of the surrounding rooms. So thick, in fact, that nothing from the outside could be heard within. This was where the emperor conducted his most private of meetings.

Currently the sole occupants of the room were Gaulba Revlon Selziofebs, emperor of the Great West Revlon Empire, and his mayor of the palace.

The emperor's forehead was creased with deep wrinkles below his delicately combed white hair, which matched the long beard growing from his chin. His eyes maintained a sharp intensity as he studied the man sitting with him.

Gaulba leaned back in his leather chair and let out a long, exhausted sigh as he rubbed his eyes to alleviate some of the weariness eating away at him.

Anyone who interacted with the emperor regularly would likely be taken aback to find him like this.

However, this was the only place where he could be alone—or in the company of his closest confidant—and let loose the burden of rule.

The young man with him was Salwis du Ohst. As mayor of the palace, he was

charged with assisting the emperor in both his public and private affairs.

He was a handsome man with a shrewd demeanor who carried an aristocratic air.

Salwis set a cup of tea down in front of the emperor, who downed it without a second thought. Gaulba then closed his eyes and took several deep breaths.

Multiple recent events had come together to thoroughly exhaust him. The first was the loss of Tagent to a horde of the undead. The city was the Great West Revlon Empire's oldest colony on the southern continent. The reasons behind the attack were still unclear, but it meant they were no longer able to import various rare materials that the colony had been shipping them, causing market prices to rise spectacularly. Stories of discord between merchants and nobles were growing in light of this.

The second event involved Tisheng, a city located in the southeast of the empire. According to reports, it was currently occupied by Holy East Revlon Empire troops, who were now using it as a base of operations.

The eastern empire forces had attacked using monsters to fill out their ranks, a technique no one had ever heard of before. The other cities in the southeast were falling one by one as they tried and failed to combat this new threat. Gaulba was pushing his advisers to learn all they could about these monster control techniques, but thus far, there had been little in the way of good news.

The only way he knew to fight back was to mobilize the southern imperial army, but it was still an open question as to whether that would be enough to stop the so-called Monster Corps.

He wanted to supplement their forces with the northern imperial army, but that would leave the border region of Wetrias unprotected, which was simply out of the question.

Then again, he also couldn't dispatch the eastern imperial army and leave the capital undefended, nor could he take the western imperial army off of its defensive role in guarding the border. The Asbania Kingdom in particular needed special attention.

The third event involved the Asbania Kingdom sending their troops over the

western border at almost the exact same time the Holy East Revlon Empire attacked, which suggested that they'd been provided advance knowledge of what was to come.

The Revlon Empire had annexed a part of Asbania in the past, and the smaller kingdom was always on the lookout for an opportunity to take back what had once been theirs.

Now was hardly the time to expose the empire's back to them.

As if these events weren't enough to cause consternation for the emperor, he'd recently been informed of yet another issue, which only added to his already-overwhelming exhaustion.

"Is what they say true?" Emperor Gaulba's voice betrayed his weariness.

"All I can say is what my acquaintance told me. The rumor came from the southwest and ultimately from a church official. Whether it is true or not, I can't say. But if it *is*, the impact on the citizenry would be immense."

The emperor shook his head. "Could the pontiff and his Holy Hilk Kingdom truly be defeated by the likes of the Nohzan Kingdom? Granted, they were a small country, and their templar knights few in number, but they were far better trained than anything the Nohzan Kingdom should have been able to muster."

The strength of the templar knights was so well known that even the emperor of the Great West Revlon Empire had thought twice about defying them. It seemed out of the question that they would fall to a country as small as Nohzan.

However, as unbelievable as this idea might be, the emperor couldn't just dismiss it.

Salwis had more to share. "This is also unconfirmed, but I heard that the Nohzan Kingdom wasn't alone in its assault. It was joined by elves, beast people, and forces from the Rhoden and Salma kingdoms. I think it would behoove us to send out spies to confirm the veracity of this claim."

The deep-set wrinkles in Emperor Gaulba's forehead grew even deeper.

The Nohzan and Rhoden kingdoms were bound by marriage, so it was believable that they'd join forces against the Hilk. But the elves, beast people, and the Salma Kingdom—a longtime rival to the Nohzan Kingdom—seemed preposterous. Just what exactly had happened down there?

The elves and beast people had obvious reasons to want to overthrow the Holy Hilk Kingdom, but Gaulba could think of no reason why Nohzan, Salma, or Rhoden would want to do the same.

And overthrowing the pontiff without the Great West Revlon Empire receiving even a single report of these countries mustering their forces? It strained belief.

In any case, Salwis was correct. They needed to know what was going on down in the south.

The emperor sighed heavily. "Organize three groups of spies and have them enter the Holy Hilk Kingdom from separate points to see what they can learn. I want to know as much as possible about what's going on down there.

Salwis bowed his head obediently. "As you wish."

Just as the mayor of the palace was about to leave the room, Gaulba held up a hand to stop him.

"Is there something else, my liege?"

The look of exhaustion had faded from Gaulba's face like a morning mist under a swift sunrise, only to be replaced by his usual piercing gaze.

"Notify the ministry to resume manufacturing the imperial inception formula. If we don't have enough people for the task, then we'll make the people we *do* have stronger. We must begin work on this at once, but in the utmost secrecy."

Salwis bowed again, though he hesitated in embarrassment as he looked back up.

"Your Highness, I will carry out your orders at once, but would you mind telling me what this 'imperial inception formula' is? I'm ashamed to admit that I've never heard of it before."

Gaulba quickly realized his mistake and laughed. "Ah, right. I haven't mentioned it to you yet. I suppose this is a good opportunity, then. Let me tell

you a long-forgotten story about the founding of the original Revlon Empire. It also explains why *our* empire is the rightful heir to the Revlon legacy.”

Emperor Gaulba beamed with confidence, his earlier exhaustion nothing but a memory.

Salwis du Ohst owned a private residence built in a suburb near the Diyonborhg palace where many nobles lived. Though he spent the majority of his evenings in his room in the palace, from time to time, he enjoyed returning to his manor to take care of his personal affairs or simply to relax.

In the master bedroom, the elaborately decorated bed that found itself empty most nights was now filled with not one but two occupants.

One of the figures was Salwis himself, while the other was a beautiful woman with long, blonde hair, an exquisite face, and deep burgundy eyes like tiny enchanted pools.

In stark contrast with Salwis’s formal attire, the woman was wearing a loose-fitting dress that emphasized her ample bosom.

The two seemed to relish this private moment together.

“I told the emperor what you told me about the Holy Hilk Kingdom, Liz, but are you sure that was the right move? It seems like it’s still so secret that even the church isn’t entirely certain what happened.”

A look of concern washed over Salwis’s face. It seemed risky for her, a deacon in the Hilk church, to be sharing these types of secrets. If what they discussed got out, she could be in very real danger.

Liz simply smiled and shook her head. “You’ve nothing to be concerned about, Salwis. My role is to be of use to you. That’s what makes me happiest. Besides, I can only imagine that the fate that befell the Hilk will have at least *some* impact on the empire, which would mean that you and I would no longer be able to meet like this. I’d hate to see that happen.”

She rested her head against his chest. Salwis pulled her close and leaned down to kiss her forehead, running a hand through her silky, golden hair. Light

glimmered off each of the strands as they poured through his fingers. He could smell the faintest scent of flowers.

Everything was so perfect that he was beginning to fear it was all a dream.

“I hate to even imagine it. I’ll do everything in my power to ensure the emperor promptly addresses the situation.”

Salwis took Liz’s hand. She smiled, bringing her lips close to his ear.

“I’ve heard that the invasion from the east is getting worse. I’m worried about the future of the empire, and what might happen to you. The thought keeps me up at night.”

Salwis’s expression softened. “That little incursion is about to be put to a swift end. The emperor has decided to use the imperial inception formula to strengthen our troops.”

Liz raised a carefully sculpted eyebrow at this. “What is this imperial inception formula?”

She ran a long, slender finger across his chest. The sensation, combined with the enticing scent emanating from her, sent his heart racing.

“Ah, yes. I only recently heard of it from the emperor myself. Apparently, it was created by the very first emperor. Only the Great West Revlon Empire knows the manufacturing process, proving once and for all that we are the true successors to the Revlon legacy.”

Liz looked up curiously. “And is it powerful enough to expel the eastern forces?”

Salwis responded with a firm nod. “Absolutely. As the name implies, this formula was used by the forces who conquered this continent to found the Revlon Empire. Even the beast people would be unable to stand against our forces once they take it.”

Liz’s burgundy eyes glimmered in the dim light. “Well, that certainly sounds intriguing. I never would have imagined that the empire had access to such a thing. So once they put this formula to work, the east will be driven back in short order?”

She ran the tip of her finger across Salwis's lip.

He smiled sheepishly. "Without a doubt. However, this isn't something we can get into the field right away. The emperor believes it will still take some time to perfect the process. But once that's done and we've unlocked this ancient strength within our soldiers... I'm excited by the mere prospect."

He pressed his lips against hers. Silence fell over the room, interrupted only by panting breaths as their tongues intertwined.

When they finally parted, Liz smiled seductively, her eyes flashing. "Well, I'm certainly looking forward to it."

Salwis felt as if he could lose himself gazing into those sparkling pools of burgundy.

The Great Canada Forest stretched across the eastern border of the Rhoden Kingdom and served as home to the majority of the elves living on the northern continent. The forest was dotted with villages both large and small that served as protection against the monsters that roamed the woods and kept out any humans who dared to enter its depths.

Maple, the elven capital created by the founding elder, lay deep within the forest. While it resembled human cities in some respects, it also boasted unique features, like apartments built inside massive tree-like structures. Were humans ever allowed to set their eyes on it, they'd find it a peculiar sight indeed.

For anyone with knowledge of the modern world, however, it bore a strong resemblance to the massive high-rises that lined the biggest cities.

Moving out from the residential area, one could find the brick workshops operated by elven and dwarven artisans. As soon as the sun began to rise, these shops came alive with sounds ranging from axes chopping wood to hammers ringing against steel.

Among these shops stood one operated by a dwarven artisan renowned for his blacksmithing skills, particularly with creating weapons and armor. In front of him, on his work bench, sat a staff that was longer than he was tall.

The staff had belonged to the pontiff and had been brought to Maple after he was killed in the assault on the Holy Hilk Kingdom. Briahn had requested that the dwarven artisan inspect it and prepare a report.

The staff was decorated with elaborate carvings and had the symbol of the Hilk church engraved on its tip. It was such a work of beauty that it was hard to believe it'd been used to summon swarms of undead.

The dwarf stroked his long glorious beard as he moved slowly around the work bench, inspecting the staff from all angles, before finally picking up a wooden mallet and giving it a couple of whacks. The resulting clangs reverberated throughout the workshop. He listened closely to the sounds.

"Well, it's certainly an amazing piece of work, but whatever it's made of, I've never encountered it before. I think it's some kind of alloy, but I can't say more."

He picked up the staff and inspected it closely. Though mostly silver in color, it gave off a bluish-purple sheen when held at an angle. It was also much lighter than its appearance would suggest. Judging by the decorative work, it wasn't intended to be used as a weapon.

The artisan pulled out a magnifying glass from his apron pocket and began carefully inspecting each of the engravings, stopping occasionally to look even closer at several spots.

"Are these...words?"

Tiny characters had been etched into the staff. However, the script resembled nothing he'd ever encountered. Another expert would need to be called in to decipher them.

"You know, I think I've seen this somewhere before. But where?"

He slammed a large fist into the palm of his hand, as if suddenly realizing something he'd overlooked.

Early the next morning, the dwarf was joined by a colleague of his, a slender elven man dressed in traditional robes and wearing glasses.

At first glance, he looked the part of a scholar...and in fact, he was. He was an

expert in linguistics and history and also a longtime friend of the dwarf who'd called him here this morning.

The elven scholar was struggling to keep his eyes open. "You got me up saying you were going to show me something interesting. If it turns out to be another fake artifact, you're buying me dinner."

He fought back a yawn as he ran a hand through his bedheaded hair.

"Just take a look at this. Isn't this the same as that thing you've spent all these years researching?"

The artisan shoved the pontiff's staff into the scholar's hands.

The elf narrowed his eyes. "Wait...what is this? You know I've no interest in blacksmithing."

"Wake up, you fool! Here! Right here! This is your specialty, isn't it?!"

The scholar leaned in for a closer look at the gorgeously decorated staff. His pale green eyes went wide.

"Wh-what?! Is this Ei writing?"

He could hardly contain his surprise. After all, he'd spent years of his career attempting to interpret this script.

"These are the same characters as the ones left for us in the founding elder's notes. What is this thing? Did it belong to the founder?"

The dwarf shook his head. "No, this was recovered from the pontiff when he was killed. Briahn wanted someone to look at it, and the job fell to me."

The scholar knew little about the situation, other than that something had caused the humans and elves to join forces against the Hilk. But why would someone in such a far-flung country be in possession of a staff with these rare characters engraved on it?

"These are without a doubt the same characters as the ones written in the founder's notes. But why? How?"

The dwarf ignored the elf's musings. "Never mind why or how. What does it say?"

The elven scholar could only shake his head. The notes left by the founding elder were numerous and detailed, containing information on how to create magical items, instructions for building villages and houses, rules for citizens to abide by, sketches of flora and fauna, and much more.

The vast majority of the notes were written in the common dialect, but a small number of them used a unique writing style known as Ei.

“Unfortunately, I cannot say. We haven’t figured out how to translate it yet. In fact, it’s believed that the founding elder purposefully obfuscated the text to make it difficult to decipher. But now that we’ve found another example of the script in a completely different location, it suggests that these characters aren’t unique to the founder. This changes everything!”

For the artisan, however, all that mattered was that the words were undecipherable. He shrugged his shoulders and sighed. “So...you still haven’t figured out what the founder’s notes say?”

This elicited an annoyed glare from the scholar. “Mark my words, I’ll interpret his writings before I die! Just you watch!”

With that, the scholar stormed out of the workshop.

“And by the time you do, I’ll probably already be dead.”

The dwarf muttered under his breath as he turned his gaze back to the staff on his work bench.

Afterword

THIS IS ENNKI HAKARI, the author of *Skeleton Knight in Another World*. Thank you so much for picking up Volume 9 of this story.

I regret that it's been so long since Volume 8 went on sale—a whole year, in fact—but all I can say is that I am eternally grateful for your patience. I'm relieved to finally be able to get this out to you.

It's been a while since your last adventure with the Skeleton Knight, but how was it? Did you enjoy it?

In the afterword of the previous volume, I mentioned that I wanted to write this volume like an after-story of sorts, but as I'm sure you noticed, it turned into a proper continuation of the main plot. Now how'd that happen...?

The previous volume ended with two of the cardinals in hiding, the dueling empires on the verge of action, and a lot of stories still left untold. Personally speaking, I like ending stories with plenty of potential still remaining.

(When watching movies or reading manga, I often get lost imagining all sorts of developments with the side stories and subplots, completely losing track of the main story. If there's anyone else out there like that, I'm sure we'd be fast friends.)

However, quite a few people reached out to me to tell me that they wanted to hear what happened next.

When it was decided that my book would actually be published, I honestly never expected it to make it all the way to nine volumes. People say that the publishing industry is on a downward trend, and I own more than a few book series that were cut off abruptly after the second volume with no further releases. All I can say is that *Skeleton Knight* must be quite lucky indeed.

Even when sequels are published, I'm told that fewer and fewer copies are printed with each new volume, but that simply wasn't the case with *Skeleton Knight*. In fact, it did so well that a manga was made. Part of me feared what might happen if I continued to push my luck.

Therefore, I decided to continue the story in a second series.

When I first started writing the story for Volume 1, I already had the events through Volume 8 planned out in my head. (I figured I'd write about a million characters by the time the battle with the pontiff took place.) I had a vague idea of what I wanted to do after that, but I actually had to sit down and really think things through as I wrote this volume.

I guess I'm the type that has a hard time writing if I don't set things up much earlier in the story, because this volume took a really long time to write. I'm truly sorry for the long wait, but I hope you enjoyed it.

The cover kinda gives the feeling of returning to a normal, slow life and is also intended to tie in to Volume 10. I plan for the next volume to feature the pursuit of the cardinals, but first, I need to hope and pray that this volume actually sells well.

If you happen to have any friends who haven't heard that Volume 9 came out, I'd really appreciate it if you'd let them know.

Finally, I'd like to thank all of the people who helped make Volume 9 a reality. It's only through your efforts that this saw the light of day. To my editor, my illustrator (KeG), and my proofreader, you have my eternal gratitude.

That's about it from me for now. If there ever is another volume to our beloved Skeleton Knight's story, I suppose I'll see you then!

FEBRUARY 2019 – ENNKI HAKARI



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